

Falling Stars

By Mari Murdock

Hour of the Boar—The Gardens of the Otomo Palace

“Painted thrushes flee

Flying toward the sacred south

Fleeing the Harvest Moon’s chill.”

The Doji poet bowed at the close of her recitation before vanishing into the dark garden like a specter. Akodo Kaede shivered slightly in the collar of her fall kimono. The first icy winds skittered through the decorative pines. Paper lanterns swayed above the audience sitting assembled on the veranda of the Otomo Palace in the Forbidden City. The guests awaited the rise of the Harvest Moon, and this *O-tsukimi* gathering marked its occasion with a poetry reading organized by Kakita Ryoku a few days before the Imperial City’s official harvest celebration. The late hour had not permitted the Emperor nor his sons to attend, but Bayushi Kachiko had promised to relate the successes of the evening to them on the morrow. Kaede watched, her eyes soft with concern. The Imperial Advisor shared an entertained whisper with a stoic *yōjimbō* before raising a regal finger to signal the want of the next poet. Kaede saw a flicker of a glance in her direction, their eyes only skimming one another. She stiffened.

The *shugenja* had never really enjoyed an intimacy of acquaintance with Kachiko, having spent most of her life away from court and retaining somewhat the honest Phoenix Clan’s distrust of the Scorpion. But her marriage to Akodo Toturi, who had won the Emerald Championship mere days after their wedding, had brought her within the Scorpion woman’s orbit. That brief look chilled her.

Had it been regret? No. Pity? No... Compassion? And since when does the unfathomable Kachiko show any sign of her inner thoughts?

The next poet took the stage: an Otomo courtier with a black, crested *kanmuri* hat and maple leaf fan.

Why take notice in me?

The wind moaned, stirring the clouds that glowed with the promise of the moon. She shook her head. This puzzling over motive and meaning was Toturi’s influence on her. Her dear husband was always calculating. She smiled.

I need play no games of strategy tonight.

Kaede took a deep breath and settled back into herself to avoid the churning waters of brooding. But they rose.

“From heaven’s wine gourd,” the poet began.

Suddenly, Kaede’s breath seemed sucked from her lungs.

“Silver light streams into the cup of a still pond.”

An invisible force crashed over her like a wave, catching her body up and flinging her far down beneath a crushing surge of blackness.

“The summer’s bloom has faded,
and I shall drink deep,
this draught of moon opening
paths of autumn dreams...”

Her open eyes saw nothing for what felt like an eternity until slowly, the realization dawned that this was not real. This was a vision.

She reached out for the elements around her, steadying her soul to float back toward the surface.

A night sky blistered before her. Fiery stars careened, climbing and sinking with the wheel of the heavens. Yet they did not fall with the sky. They fell from it.

Plummeting, the blazing lights shuddered in their final descent, raining down like thousands of dying fireflies, their light snuffed out as they collapsed into the darkness. She cried out, fumbling with outstretched hands to catch them, their lifeless bodies bleeding between her fingers.

One final star, brighter than the others, flickered, struggling to rise beyond the pull of the black. The lone firefly climbed higher, higher, beyond its dying siblings, but the ocean seethed upward to meet it. With a violent wave slashing the sky, the darkness crashed over the star, smothering it with a deafening hiss.

Kaede covered her ears and tried to scream, but the ocean had swallowed her too. She sank down, down, further into the darkness beside the last little firefly, and together they drifted down...
down...



“...though I stroll drunken
with stumbling steps, the pond cup
ripples in the wind,
the path of dreams stays steady.”

Kaede caught herself, blinking in the dim lantern light. The Otomo poet was bowing, the newly risen Harvest Moon gleaming off of his glossy black cap. She slumped wearily on her *zabuton* cushion, her breath ragged. A nearby Dragon courtier leaned toward her.

“Are you well?” Kitsuki Yaruma whispered.

Kaede smiled weakly, the polite attempt at tact barely sufficient. “It is the cold,” she managed. “Thank you for your concern.”

With weak limbs, she escaped toward the dimly lit hall, nearly tripping between the other guests as her ankles threatened to give way. The inevitable whispers arose behind her. But she didn’t care. The vision still clung to her with steel claws. Falling stars. Dying fireflies.

Toturi. I must find Toturi!

“Kaede!” a voice boomed behind her.

Seppun Ishikawa pursued her in the dim palace corridor, a frown stiffening upon her friend’s face. “Akodo Kaede-sama,” he corrected himself, regaining his courtly composure as he drew near. “Forgive me. I was late to the O-tsukimi, but I saw you here. Where are you...” His question died on his lips. “You are not ill, are you?”

“I...” she faltered. “I am fine. Thank you. But...I must find my husband.”

Ishikawa raised an eyebrow. “I’m sure he is in the Emerald Champion’s suites, just where you left him.”

“Yes,” she stammered, her eagerness tumbling between her lips before she could stop herself. “I must go to him. Right now.”

The Seppun’s eyes grew dark as her fear dawned on him. “What is wrong, Kaede?” he whispered. “Did something happen?”

“Nothing. Nothing happened—”

The cold wave returned, overcoming her. From beneath the surface, another heaven of stars scattered before her. But the pinpricks of light throbbed with gory red. The stars had faces. Voices. Screams. They hurtled all around her, bursting with a thousand flames as they plunged into the dark sea. Melting before her, smearing into a long, straight molten ribbon of steel. The blade shone, but the tip dripped with a splash of blood that mingled with the darkness. In the barrage of falling bodies, two stars lingered before her, piercing her soul with their shafts of brightness. She met their gaze—her father’s eyes: cold, dead, unblinking.

Above the whirling chaos of her vision, Kaede could hear Ishikawa’s voice. Though sounding far away, the words were clear: “What do you see?”

“Falling...stars...” she gasped, not sure if her voice echoed in her ears or merely in the vision.

The dream crumpled before her like paper consumed by flame. Ishikawa stood before her, propping her up as she reeled from the violence of her last vision.

“I must find Toturi,” she repeated.

Her friend nodded, following her at a quick pace as she stumbled down the hallway again, the need to run dragging at her knees. “I will escort you at once.”

Kaede bowed weakly, unable to thank Ishikawa properly for his invaluable service to her. Her mind was fixed on Toturi. Somehow, she knew...

His light—his life—was about to be snuffed out.

Hour of the Rat—The Suites of the Emerald Champion in the Imperial Palace

Akodo Toturi knelt with stiff legs before his writing desk. A neglected writing brush lay propped over a steel *yatate* whose open inkwell held cotton soaked with pine soot ink. The sheets and scrolls full of magisterial letters, petitions, and reports strewn before him would have to wait. Another document occupied his mind, penned that very day: the Emperor’s edict. The sacred Son of Heaven had asked him, the lowly Akodo Toturi, to shift the Celestial Order of things, making Daisetsu—the younger son—Emperor over his deposed elder brother Sotorii.

What fires this will light in all corners of Rokugan. And as the Emperor’s champion, I must put them all out.

The cold autumn air blew outside his window, and the squeaking chirps of bats drifted in on the wind. The moon would rise soon. He had been working too late once more. Was Kaede enjoying the O-tsukimi, at least?

The wilt of her eyes had told him that she was disappointed he would not attend. Such gatherings had never before piqued his interest, but tonight he had longed to go with her—



perhaps to escape the burden of his impossible task for but a few poems. But the Emperor’s will could not wait. Toturi gathered his papers together. The bats screeched again, closer, perhaps gathering the autumn’s final moths. The sound echoed in the wind.

Toturi’s hands stopped. He looked out the window into the darkness. Somehow, the screeches had sounded human. Like wicked laughter.

Bayushi Aramoro crouched motionless in the shadow of a nearby tower, enveloped in the pitch-stained black silk tied across his body and limbs. He pressed the ends of two long throwing needles against the heels of his palms. They were blackened with fire to prevent any gleam, their tips poisoned.

The starless sky seemed to tremble with icy air. An invisible storm had already descended upon the Forbidden City, and his Lady Kachiko had boldly risen to meet it. She expected a flawless execution. And he would not fail her.

We just need to slay the beast that still stands in our way.

Aramoro watched Toturi's back from the fire-lit window. He smiled beneath his mask. Kachiko had commanded that the Lion disappear without a trace, and just before moonrise, the three of them would begin their hunt.

Softly, the chirp of a bat wavered on the wind. The first shinobi was in position.

Aramoro moved for the first time in an hour, extending himself into a throwing stance, ready to strike.

The second signal sounded.

He loosed his dart, but Toturi bolted to his feet, narrowly eluding the dart's flight as he left the room. *Damn.* He drew another needle from his chest pocket, listening. Toturi's movements through the wooden walls compounded into multiple footfalls. He emerged into the courtyard below, hand at his hilt with a sentry at each shoulder. Their Imperial Guard armor glistened in their lanterns' flames.

"It may be nothing," the Emerald Champion said, "but be careful."

Across the courtyard, a shadow emerged atop the roof. With her clawed chain, the shinobi yanked free a gold-plated decorative *onigawara* roof tile directly above Toturi. He snatched back one of his men, but the *oni*-shaped statue smashed into the other, crushing the life from him.

Aramoro snarled, springing for the window just as Toturi and his remaining guard vanished back into the palace.

It seems we must end this face to face, Lion.

He tumbled into Toturi's study just as the Emerald Champion crested the stairs.

"We were expecting you," Aramoro mocked.

Before Toturi could move, his guard slashed at his belt cords, sending the Lion's *daishō* tumbling to the floor. The guard hacked at Toturi next. The Emerald Champion snatched up his yatate, scarcely glancing the disguised shinobi's blow away from his neck.

In answer, Aramoro flung his two poisoned darts, again narrowly missing as Toturi seized the Imperial Guard-clad shinobi, pulling him into the path of the needles, which stuck like small arrows into the small of the man's back. One caught a gap in the armor, and the man hissed in pain as hot poison shot through his bloodstream. He slumped to the floor.

Without losing an instant, Toturi dove toward his fallen swords, but a chained claw ripped through the window, snatching the *daishō* from Toturi's reach. The shinobi slunk into the room, whirling her weapon.

"Too slow, my lord Lion," Aramoro crowed, drawing his own blade. He charged.

The yatate fractured against the force of Aramoro's blow, the sword tip slicing down Toturi's arm. Blood and ink splattered to the floor in swollen drops, the scent of iron and ash bursting into the air. Aramoro circled the wounded Lion.

He lunged.

In a desperate dodge, Toturi sprang toward the shinobi, seizing her heavy claw midair and flinging its momentum into the side of Aramoro's face. He staggered, his vision swimming with white sparks. His knees rattled, threatening to pitch him to the floor. Growling, he blinked his vision clear.

Toturi wrestled with the shinobi, her own chain bound tightly around her throat. With a final rake at his eyes, she lay still.

Two dead. Kachiko will be furious.

Toturi stood, his eyes locked on Aramoro. From its stand on a nearby lacquered dais, he drew the sword of the Emerald Champion in a slow, deliberate arc. Its blade flashed as the Lion lowered into a fighting stance.

In fury, Aramoro lunged.

Toturi's parries were limp against his blows, fatigued from his wound. He backed the Lion against the stairs. No more room for retreat.

"Die," Aramoro spat.

In a final burst of rage, Toturi roared, driving himself forward. He was not the better swordsman, but the survival instinct spurred him into a frenzy of swirling offensive kata. The fighters shuffled back a few steps. Aramoro hissed, his own movement growing frantic in the flurry. He lost his rhythm.

No. He could not lose to Toturi.

Not again.

But Toturi's whirl of steel had forced him back.



It would end.

Kachiko.

Suddenly, the Emerald Champion staggered, the inertia of his blows reversing as he stumbled back toward the stairs. The shinobi with the chain about her neck, having feigned her death, had seized Toturi's ankle, toppling his balance.

Aramoro lunged a final time.

His blade thrust cleanly through Toturi's chest.

White surprise rimmed the Lion's eyes. He swayed before falling backwards, down the stairs, bouncing once before vanishing into the dark.

"Ha!" Aramoro flicked the Lion's blood from his blade.

You are defeated, Akodo Toturi.

From outside, the clatter of rushing footsteps sounded. People approached the courtyard below. Cries exploded below as the arriving party found the crushed guardsman outside a locked door.

Aramoro had only moments.

Slinging the poisoned shinobi's body over his shoulder, he gestured for his comrade to snatch up his fallen throwing needles, erasing all shinobi presence from the room.

A crash indicated entry below.

He hissed.

No time for Toturi's body.

He bounded out the window, fleeing across the tiled bridge pole, the chain fighter close behind him. His naked face stung with the chill of the autumn night. The moon had finally crested the Imperial palace, illuminating the Forbidden City with haunting light. He slunk into the shadows, clenching his teeth.

This was for you, Kachiko.

Kaede didn't wait for Ishikawa and his lantern as she dashed past the busted door. The thrumming of her steps barely outsounded the pounding of her heart. The windows had been dark.

Had he retired early?

Her foot suddenly slipped. She gasped, clutching at the wall to regain her balance. Below her in the dark pooled a slippery, warm puddle. She shuddered.

"No!" she gasped, her breath catching in her throat.

Ishikawa dashed forward with his lantern, the light swinging wildly.

There, before her, lay Toturi, framed in his own blood.

"What happened?" Ishikawa asked, scanning the dark chambers.

Kaede fell to her knees. Her fingers were shaking, but she managed to touch her poor husband's hand.

The skin was bloodless, cold.

Her vision had come true.

Toturi was gone.

She clenched his hand, a wail of despair building deep within her. Beneath her trembling fingers, Kaede felt the meagerest flicker of life. She gasped. There, again. She felt the tremor of a feeble heartbeat. In another moment, it would fade.

The shugenja shut her eyes, drawing upon the power down deep within her soul. She thrust all from her mind. The Fire of her anger. Water of her sorrow. Air of her breath. Earth of her trembling body. Forsaking them all, she seized the emptiness between the elements, the emptiness within herself, abandoning herself to the Void.

In a wave, the Realm of the Void rushed over her, nearly sweeping her away in its eagerness. She clutched tightly to Toturi's hand to anchor her, to not lose herself. Bursting from its depths, she steadied herself on its churning surface.

There, beneath her, reflected upside down under the glassy surface, Toturi's spirit wavered, a fading specter that sank into the darkness.

"Toturi!" Kaede cried, reaching down through the starry ocean to her husband's soul. "Please, do not abandon me."

His spirit looked at her before turning his back, floating down as if drawn down by a languid current to enter a cavernous hole below. The gates to Meido. His reflection waned as he approached it, as if to vanish forever upon passing through its doors.

No! she commanded everything. Using the Void to thread together all the elements, she drew them to her. As if captured in a net, Air, Earth, Fire, and Water screamed, thrashing and quaking and roaring, but she dragged them to her will, bowing them to the force of her soul in an invocation that echoed through the fabric of time.

Toturi's spirit stopped, pulled back in the wake of the elements.

"No, Kaede," his voice boomed, spoken without his mouth. "Leave me to my death, and do not gamble with your own fate."

But her prayer lured him back. Slowly, his ghostly visage beneath the surface sharpened as he came nearer, growing stronger as it drew life from her own reflection.

"This is not my fate," she cried, their reflections merging, his soul breaching the border between life and death. Her tears rippled across the water's surface. "It is ours."

Before her stood the powerful, unbroken reflection of her husband's spirit. Gasping, she released her hold on the Realm of the Void. The darkness ebbed from the world around her like a receding tide from the shore. Toturi's body re-emerged at her feet. The light of Ishikawa's lantern flickered on.

"Kaede," Toturi mourned, his spirit voice dwindling with her trance. "What price have you paid for me, my wife?"

From far away, Ishikawa's voice echoed. "Kaede."



He called her, but she ignored him. She just wanted to sleep, to slip down into the eternal pits of oblivion. But his cry echoed in the hollow emptiness. She latched on to it, letting it draw her back.

She opened her eyes. The trance of the Realm of the Void had finally broken. Ishikawa was propping her up, shaking her awake.

“Kaede! He’s alive!” he shouted, a skeptical triumph in his voice. “Toturi lives.”

Her husband’s chest weakly rose and fell with breath. She clutched at his hand once more, a timid warmth rising again in his skin. The flicker of his struggling pulse was enough for her to hope. He would live.

But his spirit’s last words haunted her. She shuddered in spite of her conquest over death. What would that weak heartbeat cost her?

Seppun Ishikawa only half-listened to the gate guards’ rambling report of the evening as Kaede and her half-conscious husband slipped past them out of the Forbidden City. As Captain of the Seppun Honor Guard, Ishikawa could draw the guards away from their posts, but only for a moment without rousing suspicion. His meager distraction would only work if Kaede’s powers could cover their escape in pure darkness. But she had overexerted herself. She sacrificed too much for Toturi.

He frowned, a twinge of jealousy wriggling in his chest.

If only he had died...

Ishikawa snapped the end of the thought off like a rotten branch. He was loyal to the Emerald Champion, no matter who held the office. Even if it was Kaede’s husband.

“Please,” Kaede had begged for him, “we must leave tonight.”



“But to skulk out of the city like thieves?” Ishikawa had argued, the dishonor of the plan irking him. “We cannot hide this attempt against the Emerald Champion’s life. I must rally the guards. I must alert the Emperor.”

“Whoever has done this may return to kill Toturi if we reveal he yet lives,” Kaede pleaded. Her tired eyes grew heavier with tears.

Ishikawa had looked away, unwilling to see her weep. His foremost duty to help the Emerald

Champion compelled him, even if it took Kaede away.

“I will help you,” he had promised. And she in turn had promised to return to the city once Toturi was safely hidden.

The guards finished speaking, an awkward recognition growing between them as Ishikawa’s frown deepened. Nodding their dismissal, he headed back toward the suites of the Emerald Champion.

That wing of the palace was still dark. The Emerald Champion’s servants had not yet returned from their evening meal to help their lord and lady retire for the night. He would need their help, and their promise of secrecy, to clean up the mess. Toturi needed to vanish if his attacker’s motive was to emerge. But who would arrange an attack against the Emperor’s own champion?

Ishikawa lifted his lantern to search for any sign the rooms could give him. A prayer to the fortunes against the unclean slipped between his lips as the gory mess unfolded before him. The corpse of the dead guard with the crushed helmet still lay in the hallway where he had dragged it.

The rooftop.

The other guard posted was missing.

A traitor, perhaps?

At the foot of the stairs, the pool of crimson congealed into a dark lake. The Emerald Champion’s sword lay next to where Toturi’s body had been. He took up the ancient blade, its green silk bindings somehow still spotless, and followed the bloody trail up the stairs to the study. Toturi’s own daishō, its belt cords cut, lay far across the room.

Toturi had been disarmed.

Ishikawa approached Toturi’s abandoned writing desk. The yatate rested askew beside the brushes, its inkwell snapped from its handle, sword marks marring its steel surface. Beside it, a stack of letters sat jumbled, a tiny, pinpricked hole tunneling through them at an angle. He turned toward the window to stare at the rooftop.

A throwing needle.

Ishikawa flinched, a cold sweat skittering across his body.

Shinobi.

The word throbbed in his mind like a cankered sore. He hissed a curse and tightened his grip on the Emerald Champion’s sword. Someone was breaking the laws of Heaven to move against the Emperor. He must find out who.