

# Imperial Gifts

By Robert Denton III

*Yasurugi laid the massive greatsword on the bamboo stand with the blade facing up. The fire-hued wings that were its hand guard unfurled above its cherrywood handle, the perfect steel ring pommel adorned with owl feathers, the mirrored steel of the blade a window into the reflected world. It was steel he'd forged himself from iron sand, blue quartz, and charcoal. He'd made tsurugi before—Hida's retainer Kaiu had shown him how—but no sword he'd previously forged had ever been of this quality.*

*Or so he hoped. Yasurugi bit his lip. The sword was as much a product of the blacksmith's spirit as it was his skill, according to his sensei. If he'd faltered even once during the forging—if he'd succumbed to doubt or fear...*

*Sitting straight, he suspended a plum blossom just above the edge and, with his breath held, let it go. The blossom gently fell against the blade and was sheared in two.*

*"Well done! Well done!" came a sharp, piercing voice. A figure in black feathers and blue silks appeared beside him, wings folded tightly against its back. Expressionless avian eyes twinkled faintly above its midnight beak. "Not bad for a beginner's effort, yes?"*

*Yasurugi bowed. "Thank you, sensei." Rising, his gaze caught on something cradled in the creature's avian claws, extended in its one-legged stance: a slender sheath of polished cypress, intricately carved with dancing dragons, the detail even finer than the carvings that had left his mother's hands.*

*"An excellent sword needs an excellent home, yes?"*

*Yasurugi's chest swelled, tears welling in his eyes. That the paltry effort of a student might join with his sensei's masterwork into one complete piece was more than his heart could bear. But to shed joyful tears would be disgraceful, and so he bowed instead, feeling his heart skip as the steel forged by his hands slid perfectly into the sheath.*

*"A piece of you," the tengu squawked, "folded into the steel. You surrendered much into it, yes?" Lifting the sword, the tengu's head bobbed like a dove's. Its gaze grew cloudy. "Kunshu shall be its name. Whatever fate befalls this blade, so too shall befall its masters."*

*Yasurugi gasped at the spoken prophecy. What had he set into motion? He felt suddenly like wings without wind, and he collapsed into a kneel, gathering his breath with earnest effort.*

*"I should not have shown you this technique," said the tengu. Although its expression did not change, its voice thick with concern. "Human souls are finite, yes? The cost is too high."*

*"I would give more," Yasurugi replied, slowly recovering, lifting his face. "What is just one life compared to the hundreds entrusted to my uncle?"*



*The renewed twinkle in the tengu's eyes was like a smile. "Just one life might make a difference someday. But so be it." The bird crossed its wings and stood straight. "You have exceeded my expectations, my student. Now...do so again."*

*Yasurugi's eyes widened. It could only mean that he'd been judged worthy to continue his lessons. His heart swelled like a rising tide once again.*

*"This time," the tengu added, "you will give the blade five folds, yes?"*

*Five folds. It was unheard of in the human realms. Even the finest of Kaiu's blades used only three. Surely the metal would grow brittle when folded so many times! Surely it would warp when each layer cooled at different rates!*

*"Is such a thing possible?" he whispered.*

*"Oh, simple child of Doji," the tengu whispered, "let me show you how..."*

"How did the bird-man talk without lips?"

The child's question, delivered with bright-eyed innocence, was met with ripples of laughter. Fumio's ear flicked at the sound, but he remained stubbornly curled in Doji Shizue's lap.

"Crows can talk!" claimed one of the children, a boy wearing an orange kimono. "I've heard them lots of times."

Another child, bald and wearing gold and green silks, raised his voice. "Sure! They go, 'Kaa! Kaa!'" He flapped his oversized sleeves, and the children burst into laughter again.

Shizue sighed inwardly, lowering her illustrations of Doji Yasurugi and the humanoid crow. This was supposed to be a lesson about the forging of Kunshu, the Ancestral Sword of the Hantei. But predictably, the children fixated on the giant talking bird instead.

Not that she'd been any different at that age, she reminded herself. She could almost hear Lady Teinko chiding her over requesting yet another tengu story...



A tiny hand tugged at her kimono, the owner staring up with big brown eyes. "Where did all the tengu go, Shii-sama? Why don't we see them anymore?"

Dramatically, Shizue looked up through the box-shaped window in the chamber's roof. "They live in the clouds," she replied. "And on the tallest mountaintops. Perhaps, one day, if you are lucky, you might see one."

Two dozen eyes followed her gaze in open wonder.



"It sounds like you all have your heads in the clouds," Shizue observed. She tapped her lips for a moment. "Perhaps I had better tell you another story, then? A cautionary tale about a tengu's anger, and why one should treat all living beings with dignity."

Drawing a breath to begin, she hesitated. A pale woman leaned against the chamber's entrance, hands folded into her purple kimono sleeves, black hair forming a curtain around her face. Against the room's winter-themed murals, she was a midnight brushstroke.

"Then again," Shizue said, "is it not time for your calligraphy lessons?"

A sea of disappointed groans rose with the children. Fumio protested before leaping from her lap as she stood. Leaning on her cane, she shooed the children along. "Yes, yes. It is terrible to leave your favorite teacher, is it not? We shall resume tomorrow. Hurry now, Akari-sama will be terribly upset with me if you are late!"

Her eyes followed them as their echoing voices and childish arguments faded down the hall to their next class. Shizue regarded the woman with trained eyes. The passing days had done little to change Iuchi Shahai since she'd stumbled into one of Daisetsu's classes at his invitation. She stood straighter, her stride more confident, her clothing less rustic and closer to the latest fashion favored by the courts. Yet she still avoided the gaze of others and said little. She was an accidental black splotch on the corner of an ink wash painting: only polite to overlook—but marring the landscape and impossible to ignore. She didn't belong here.

And from Shahai's first mumbled word, Shizue had wanted to befriend her.

"I am glad you came, Shahai-san," Shizue finally said, offering a bow. "Please do come in."

Shahai spun to face Shizue and bowed in return. She avoided Shizue's smiling eyes and folded into her seat with the grace of a shadow. "Thank you," she murmured, lips moving just enough to utter the words, not a single bit more. "Apologies for interrupting."

"You are right on time," Shizue replied, setting a ceramic cup before the Iuchi, then one for herself. A small bulb of Jewel Dew and Hotei's Smile rocked gently at the bottom of each cup, a tangle of dried tea leaves resembling a briar. Shizue had selected and bundled them herself.

"This season's students are rather bright," Shizue continued as she checked on the kettle, ensuring the water was not too hot. "They have taken well to their lessons." She glanced back at her somber guest. "What of your students, by the way?"

Shahai stared at the dried bulb in her cup with a dark eye. "Let's just say, if you ever wanted to trade, I'd consider it."

Shizue chuckled as she lifted the preheated kettle. Only brief discomfort flickered across her face, her uncooperative leg making the movement awkward. Shahai started to rise, as if to help, but Fumio put an end to that, leaping suddenly into the young woman's lap—having seemingly gained several pounds by sheer feline will.

As she slowly crossed the room, Shizue caught two courtiers peeking in from further down the hall. They swiftly departed, their abrupt turn a concession that they'd been discovered. One whispered to the other, and although she could not hear them, Shizue knew what they said.



She'd heard the gossip, known that her letters to Shahai were intercepted and read a dozen times, as was traditional with any letters sent in the Imperial Capital. "The bluebird and the crow" were how the court referred to their meetings together. She regarded the woman absently scratching Fumio's ears, face white with powder, a midnight river of silk hair covering one side of her face. Their contrast was undeniable, and observers would see little in common between them.

But that was only the surface. Shizue, too, had been an outsider, once upon a time...

As the water from Shizue's kettle poured into Shahai's cup, the saturating tea-bulb unraveled, blooming to reveal a dried purple flower, a globe amaranth from Shizue's own garden. Although subtle, Shizue still caught the widening of Shahai's eye and hoped the woman had received her silent encouragement.

"The Crane also make blooming tea?" Shahai asked as Shizue sat across from her. Her tone was almost...cautious?

"The Doji learned it from the Shinjo," she replied, her smile brightening her words. "I hope my own efforts weren't too clumsy."

Viridescent tendrils stained the water beneath Shahai's expressionless face. Shizue's heart twanged like a *biwa*, and for a moment she feared that her gesture had accomplished the opposite effect, and the poor shugenja had only grown more homesick, lonelier...

"You did well," said Shahai, and lifted the cup.

Shizue released her breath. Making the little tea bulbs was a time-consuming endeavor, one in which she'd failed and had to retry many times. It would take more than this, however, to cross the gulf between them.

"Any word from Toshi Ranbo?" Shahai asked, her voice so quiet that Shizue almost missed it.

The Crane folded her hands. "The court, to ensure a peaceful end to the fighting, has made the Scorpion the city's stewards."

The tea cup hid Shahai's frown, but not her displeased eyes. "What an unexpected development," she said flatly. "Far preferable to our clan's proposal. One wonders what the Scorpion will next acquire for '*stewardship*'."

The sarcastic words echoed Shizue's heart, but she didn't say so. "Great wisdom is demonstrated by entrusting the city to the care of the Honest Scorpion, and those who believed the city could be taken by unruly complaints have been silenced." She sipped, savoring the delicate tea. "Still, I fear Kakita Asami must endure a long winter with the Matsu as consequence."

"Kakita Yuri's daughter?" Shahai perked up a little. "I hadn't heard. You knew her?"

"We were friends when we were younger." Shizue smiled into her cup. "I think perhaps she was closer with my brother."

"Do you know where she is being held?"

She'd spoken the question so casually, Shizue nearly missed it, along with the implications. "No," she replied, voice lowering to a whisper, "but I have my suspicions."



"I will mention her to father in my letter tonight," Shahai offered. "Perhaps someone will have heard something."

What did that mean? Did the Unicorn have scouts in Lion territory? A story formed in Shizue's mind: Unicorn scouring Lion lands for any sign of Asami. Two Great Clans could truly bond over a story like that.

Shahai sighed and looked away. "I *assume* he is still receiving my letters..."

Shizue felt sorry for the poor Iuchi. The Forbidden City was the center of the universe, the axis upon which the world turned, overflowing with courtiers and seneschals to rival stars in the sky. In other words, a very lonely place.

As Shahai sipped her tea, Shizue slowly procured the small lacquered box from beneath the table and placed it between them. Gently, she nudged it forward.

Shahai's eyes widened. "Is that...?" She regarded Shizue with growing surprise. "You found a set?"

"They are smaller than I had originally estimated," Shizue confessed. "On such short notice, the artist may have rushed through the finishing. I apologize for any shortcomings."

It looked for a moment as though Shahai might reach across the table and embrace her. But the woman simply smiled and lowered her head. "I do not know how I can repay you, Shizue-sama."

Shizue waved it aside. "Do not be troubled. It is nothing between friends."

Shahai raised her head, watching the Crane with her dark eyes. Then, nodding to herself, she drew something small from her kimono folds and extended it across the table.

It was a tiny brass crane cradling a faceted glass orb. The trinket was attached to a long chain, as if meant to be hung from the neck.

"It is a poor recompense for this favor you've done me," Shahai explained, "but even so, please take it and my thanks."

Shizue paused. She'd heard rumors about Shahai's trinkets. According to the whispers of the shrine keepers during her daily prostrations, the Seppun family shugenja struggled to invoke the kami's protection over the Emperor each evening, blaming this on the presence of Shahai's baubles. Shizue knew nothing of the Kami's Way, but she knew *meishōdō* had something to do with trinkets like these. Was this one of them? She drew a quick breath. It was, wasn't it? This was a *meishōdō* trinket, one of the objects that had caused such a recent stir.





She couldn't refuse. It would insult Shahai. All the efforts she'd made to cross the barrier, to befriend the daughter of the Iuchi daimyō on behalf of the Crane, would be wasted. And besides, there was a scandalous appeal to carrying one of Shahai's trinkets beneath her collar in open court...

Shizue bowed as she accepted the bauble. She pointedly admired the artisanship, the way the trapped light danced between the reflected facets of the orb. "It's beautiful," she remarked. She looked up with wide gray eyes. "What...does it do?"

"It hangs from your neck," said Shahai.

She didn't seem to understand why she'd made Shizue laugh.

---

One final time, Shahai drew the lacquered box from her pouch. The seam was nearly invisible, until her nimble fingers flicked the wooden tab and parted the two doors, revealing the velvet lining inside. Resting in the box-shaped depressions of the velvet sat a set of *Fortunes and Winds* dice: twenty-four tiny cubes as white as a foal's teeth, and six more as black and glossy as obsidian. She ran her fingers over each die's smooth surface, with thin, graceful kanji carved into each face and delicately gilded in gold leaf. Shizue had downplayed the quality, but to Shahai's eye, whatever Kakita artisan had carved these dice had well-honored their teachers.

Daisetsu once possessed a dice set much like this one. He'd enjoyed it until it had been discovered by a horrified maid, then consequently misplaced and lost. Doubtlessly relieving the Seppun; *Fortunes and Winds* was not the most well-regarded of pastimes.

Such a gift was extremely unsuitable for an Imperial Prince. That, Shahai reasoned, was why it was perfect for him.

She closed the box and tucked it away. It was nearing the end of the Hour of the Serpent. He would be passing the reflection pond by the Spring Pagoda. Shahai made her way there, passing like a shadow in the halls of the Forbidden City. Shuffling courtiers kept their eyes ahead or turned to the floor. A Scorpion flicked open a fan to whisper to her Phoenix companion as she passed. Shahai paid them no mind.

When she found him, Daisetsu's procession had been interrupted by a teenage girl wearing the Otomo family crest and far too much makeup. Shahai snorted at the girl's poor attempts at wordplay, noting how perfectly still the prince kept his features, even as his *yōjimbō* searched the clearing desperately for something more interesting. Shahai approached, and Daisetsu, meeting her eyes only briefly, tilted to include her.

"Forgive my rudeness," Shahai said, not speaking so much as letting the words fall, "but His Highness' riding lessons..."

Annoyance flickered across the Otomo's face. Daisetsu nodded. "Ah, is it nearly the Hour of the Horse?" He excused himself, tossing a wordless glance to his *yōjimbō*, a mute instruction to stay behind, as he often did when Shahai was involved. Leaving beside him, Shahai felt the samurai's glare on her back as surely as a pyre in summertime.

---



As they walked, finally alone, Daisetsu relaxed. "Yet again, I owe you." He sighed. "I wonder under which rock the matchmaker found that one."

Shahai's stifled laugh came out as a snort. "Is it so wise to perpetually avoid your suitors, my prince?"

He shrugged. "Father will choose whomever he prefers. I needn't be involved."

The halls gave way to a tiered courtyard built around a sand garden. They walked along the third-floor balcony as servants raked grooves into the sand and sweated beneath the oppressive afternoon sun. Daisetsu stopped suddenly, placing his hands on the banister, and looked down. Shahai stood just behind him, wondering why he'd paused, but not asking.

"Is it true the Unicorn arrange their own marriages?" Daisetsu asked.

Shahai smirked. It wasn't the first untrue rumor about her people she'd heard. "There are a great many courtship rituals among the Unicorn, my lord, but that is not one of them."

He nodded softly. "I would much prefer a Unicorn spouse, if I had my choice."

She didn't know how to respond. That was forward for the prince...what exactly did he mean by that? Was he suggesting something? She regarded his young face tilted down at the tiers beneath him, oiled hair framing sharp Imperial features, gilded by the sun as if in homage to the earliest Emperors, who were said to glow like their founder. She was still eligible, and only four years older than he. In fact, their birth stars might even be compatible...

She shook her head. No. It was just an idle comment. She shouldn't read into it.

It suddenly occurred to her that they were standing at a vantage that offered a clear view into the room across from them, through a circular window set into the wall. Daisetsu was spying on someone? After glancing around to be sure they were truly alone, she risked edging closer to follow his gaze. It made her heart beat a little faster; anyone coming upon them would notice the improper distance, and conclusions could be drawn. She would only look for a moment...

Framed in the window was a massive *tsurugi*, easily four *shaku* in length, resting on a bamboo stand. Even from this vantage, Shahai could see the exquisite dragon-sheath and the brilliant patina of the winged hand guard. It had to be Kunshu, the Ancestral Sword of the Hantei, displayed in its place of honor. She'd never seen the Emperor's sword before, not even at such a distance, but based on what she's overheard from Shizue's description there was no mistaking it for anything else.





She glanced at Daisetsu. There was no desire in his eyes as he looked upon the sword, but it seemed as if he were waiting for something. But what?

Looking back, she noticed a second, shorter sword beside Kunshu's stand, this one slightly curved in the manner of a *tachi*. It was a simple soldier's sword, no adornment, no marks whatsoever. "What is that other sword?"

"That is Shori," Daisetsu replied, "the Ancestral Sword of the Lion. It rests beside Kunshu in a place of honor. The Lion Clan Champion cannot even hold that blade without the blessing of the Emperor."

"I had not realized the Lion were so picky about drawing their blades."

Daisetsu's smirk at her comment gave her an unexpected amount of pleasure. It was in that moment that she realized her hand had found its way into the pouch, and her fingers curled around the sharp edges of the box. Should she present it to him now? Unbidden, her hand started to lift it...

"Ah," said Daisetsu, "there he is."

Hantei Sotorii appeared in the room. Shahai's heart quickened with the pricking instinct to duck away, but Daisetsu held firm, and she was tethered to him by invisible string. "He'll see us," she whispered, trembling with the thrill of such a taboo, to be discovered spying on the Emperor's eldest son.

Daisetsu shook his head. "My brother sees only what is in front of him."

Oblivious, Sotorii brazenly lifted Kunshu from its stand, and with some trouble, freed it from its sheath. Daisetsu raised an eyebrow. "It seems brother is playing with father's toys again."

Holding the sword awkwardly, Sotorii sliced at the air, as if fighting invisible opponents, pausing only to pose in trembling imitations of folk heroes depicted in woodblock print.

Shahai clasped her hands over her mouth to stifle a bark of laughter. One could be executed for such things, but she could not help it. The façade of a noble scion of Hantei had given way to a mere child playing with a stick. As the prince slashed at invisible opponents, his strikes growing clumsy as Kunshu's weight tired him, the humor of the spectacle slowly faded.

This was the heir to the throne. Bushidō dictated that the greatest warriors of the most powerful families in the entire span of the world would be led by...*this*.

It was not so funny, after all.

"He's always been obsessed with that sword," Daisetsu murmured. He wasn't smiling anymore. His eyes were heavy with pity, his hands tightening around the banister, knuckles whitening. "He acts as though it is already his, but he's not Emperor yet. Even then, he won't have it right away."

Seeing her questioning look, he explained. "There is a tradition dating back to when the folk hero Doji Yasurugi presented Kunshu to the first Hantei. Before the Emperor's coronation, the Seppun entrusts Kunshu into the care of a Great Clan, who guards the sword until the day of the Emperor's ascension. They have the honor of presenting it to the newly crowned Son of Heaven."



As Sotorii returned the blade, Daisetsu's eyes narrowed. "Had he his whim, he'd be wearing it now."

"It is just a sword," she said.

He looked at her plainly, as if surprised. For what it was worth, she too was startled by her own words, but now she couldn't stop them. Her heart had been uncorked by what she'd seen. "It's an old piece of metal. There are surely thousands like it in the Empire."

He shook his head. "No. Kunshu is special."

"Perhaps," she conceded, "but why do you care if he possesses it?"

"I don't." In the window, Sotorii struggled to sheathe the massive sword. "I am afraid of what he'd do with it."

They stood there, silent, as the shadows crawled across the sand garden.

"But then," Daisetsu whispered with distain, "to follow him is what Bushidō demands."

*Then damn Bushidō, she thought. I will follow only you.*

The thought stunned her. It had seemingly come from nowhere. She knew then that she'd committed a great sin, as surely as if she'd spoken those very words, or struck the prince Sotorii with her own hand. It didn't matter that it was only a thought. The *Tao* said, "With our minds we make the world."

It was still treason.

But she'd meant it. It was her heart's truth. If Bushidō demanded that she follow one who would play games with a sacred object, then Bushidō had no use.

Sotorii was gone. In the window, Kunshu sat in its honored space.

"Would you do me a kindness, Shahai?"

*Anything.* "Of course, my lord."

Daisetsu looked into her eyes. "Don't ever let me become like him."

Shahai let the box slip back into the bag without the prince ever seeing it. She'd been wrong. It was too inadequate, an unworthy gift for him. She could do better than that. He was worth more.

"I promise," she said, her words like steel. "On my life, I swear it."

