

Her Father's Daughter

By D.G. Laderoute

Somewhere along the Emperor's Road...

Daidoji Nerishma peered into the gloomy undergrowth along the road as the Crane Clan caravan he was escorting plodded along past him. Above the clomping hooves of draft oxen and the rumbling and squeaking of wagons piled high with bags of rice, he struggled to discern what had he seen, or heard—

Nerishma flung himself aside, the arrow that would have slammed into his face thumping, instead, into a bale of rice. Recovering, he raised his triple-headed spear and shouted, “Ambush! Be ready!”

Rough men in shabby peasants’ garb erupted from the undergrowth. Nerishma found himself suddenly locked in melee with two—no, three—of them, who slashed at him with peasant weapons. Frantically, he knocked aside their blows and struck back, a whirl of dust, sweat, steel, and confusion—

Silver flashed as the long blade of a *naginata* slashed one of the bandits, then another, across the throat. Nerishma gutted the third, then turned in time to see someone rush past him in a billow of dark cloak, hood held in place with a conical, straw hat. Barely breaking stride, the cloaked figure—whom Nerishma vaguely recognized as another of the caravan guards—struck down a bandit with another effortless sweep of the *naginata*. A few paces, and another fell. Another.

Back along the caravan, guards slashed and stabbed at their ambushers, holding their own, driving them back. Gripping his spear, Nerishma turned and hurried after the cloaked figure toward the head of the caravan, determined not to leave his benefactor to fight alone. He caught up in time to find the hooded guard facing a lean man wielding the swords of a samurai—a katana in his right hand, a *wakizashi* in his left. The man bore no *mon* or other heraldry on his drab kimono. He was a ronin, then, and probably the leader of this bandit pack.

Nerishma rushed to join the cloaked figure, who was probably also a ronin, a mercenary hired to protect the caravan. But the *naginata*, dripping blood, swung to block his way. At the same time, a woman’s voice shouted to the bandit leader, “This caravan rightfully travels the Emperor’s road. How *dare* you assault it?”

The ronin raised his swords. “These people and their families are starving. The rice in those wagons is better filling their bellies than the Emperor’s tax houses. So, they do what they must.”

“It is certainly not your place to decide such a thing. Nor is any excuse sufficient for the crimes you have committed here today. There is only the penalty, which is death.”



"Death awaits us all," he replied, taking a stance Nerishma recognized as *niten*, the dual-wielding sword style favored by the Dragon Clan. Nerishma again started forward, determined to help dispatch this dishonorable dog of a ronin—and once more, the bloody naginata moved to block him. This time, its wielder turned.

The face looking back at him from under the hood shone like alabaster, striking beauty framed by snow-white hair. Nerishma recognized it immediately and took an astounded step back.

It was Doji Hotaru, Champion of the Crane Clan, and his lord and master. Nerishma instinctively began to bow, but Hotaru shook her head. "Maintain your stance, samurai-san, and step back. I appreciate your desire to assist, but I shall deal with this myself."

"O-of course, Doji-ue. As you command."

He straightened, still eager to stand with his champion despite her command and his own stunned amazement. Clearly she'd been with the caravan for some time now, concealing herself in traveler's garb. But why? And why would she deign to confront this ronin cur in any case, a man so far beneath her in the Celestial Order he might as well have been an actual dog?

But it was not Nerishma's place to question, so he stepped back.

Hotaru turned back to the ronin and raised her naginata. The ronin bowed, and Hotaru returned the bow. A pause, then the man launched himself at Hotaru like a leaping tongue of flame. Hotaru jumped aside, lashing out with the much-longer naginata, forcing the ronin to pull his strikes short. But the man recovered in an instant, dashing inside the naginata's arc. Hotaru dodged the katana by a finger span, but the wakizashi opened a shallow gash on her arm.

Nerishma gasped and took an involuntary step—

Maintain your stance, samurai-san.

Nerishma teetered on a knife-edge of warring compulsions: assist his champion, or obey her...

Gritting his teeth, he obeyed.

The ronin struck again and again, but Hotaru was as water, a flow of movement avoiding the blows. Still, Nerishma began to despair at his champion's inability to seize the initiative... until abruptly she did, becoming as fire, a blur of furnace rage, but channeled by the subtlety of air. She'd been merely leading her opponent, Nerishma realized, provoking his most devastating attacks, learning his moves and countermoves, and doing it all in a matter of seconds that had only *felt* like minutes.

The ronin fell back, desperately trying to fend off the whirling naginata. Once, he found an opening and launched himself into it—but it was a feint, leaving him unbalanced and overextended. Hotaru slammed the naginata into his shoulder, cleaving him to the opposite collarbone. The ronin toppled back in a shower of blood, mouth gaping, gasping for air that would never reach his lungs.



The Crane Clan Champion didn't hesitate, swinging a blow that struck off the ronin's head.

Nerishma waited for his champion to stand down from the confrontation. Instead, she simply stared down at her fallen opponent. Could there be a worse injury than her arm, one he hadn't seen? He started toward Hotaru, saying, "Doji-ue, I remain at your service, should you need—"

"No," she said, flicking the blood from her naginata, then glancing at her injury. "I have suffered worse sparring with Toshimoko-sensei." She looked back along the caravan, then turned to Nerishma. "The remaining bandits are fleeing. Retrieve the ronin's blades, Daidoji-san, in case there is someone deserving of their return. Then, let us return to our places in the caravan and wait for it to resume its way to Ootosan Uchi."

Nerishma bowed. "Hai, Doji-ue."

It was not his place to question. Still, for the rest of the trip, Nerishma had to work very hard at pretending his clan champion wasn't walking only paces away.



Her sister's apartment in the Imperial Palace offered a breathtaking view.

The gardens below, Hotaru saw, were impeccably arranged for the season, the fuchsia glow of pink moss a brilliant contrast to the muted cream and pale purple of wisteria. The first roses were coming into bloom, yellow and crimson counterpoints.

It rivaled the splendor of the gardens in the Chisei District of Ootosan Uchi, where the Crane Clan embassy stood.

Rivaled—but certainly didn't surpass. There: a slight mismatch in the roses, a minor imbalance of color that would be missed by most samurai. Such imperfection would never be tolerated in the Fantastic Gardens of Kyūden Doji. But those were the exemplar for the Empire, always emulated but never matched, not even here, in the Imperial City...

Kyūden Doji. Hotaru touched the windowsill, but no longer saw the gardens. Instead, she saw the Crane Clan's ancestral seat of power, a palace of white stone and impeccable grace perched on cliffs overlooking the Sea of the Sun Goddess. Waves pounded ceaselessly against their rocky base, a steady, booming rhythm—

The cliffs from which her mother had thrown herself...the waves that had swallowed and taken her...because her father, Doji Satsume, had driven her to it—



Hotaru's grip tightened on the sill as her thoughts changed again. Doji Satsume, who had stubbornly kept the clan championship for years even as he held the office of Emerald Champion: the Emperor's personal champion, commander of the Imperial Legions, and most senior magistrate of Rokugan. Satsume, who had only reluctantly passed the Crane Clan championship to her at the urging of his brothers-in-law, Kakita Toshimoko and Kakita Yoshi. Satsume, who was now dead, and just when the Empire needed its Emerald Champion the most.

A thump from behind her. Hotaru glanced back. Framed by a pair of perfectly matched paper *shōji* screens, Doji Shizue fixed her cat, Fumio, with a disapproving glare over a scroll he'd knocked off a table. Leaning on her cane, Shizue returned the scroll to its place and minutely adjusted an *ikebana* flower arrangement the cat had apparently also disturbed. Hotaru couldn't help but smile. From the polished floor of teak from the far-off Islands of Spice and Silk, to a matched series of *sumi-e* ink drawings decorating the walls, Shizue's apartment was impeccable. There would never be mismatched rose blossoms here.

Her cane softly tapping, Shizue hobbled over to join Hotaru at the window. "What is it you see, Doji-ue?"

Hotaru dissembled. "Why, the gardens, of course, resplendent under Lady Sun." Feigning disapproval, she added, "And you need not be so formal as to call me 'ue,' Sister. Not when we are alone."

"If protocol becomes ingrained in the courts of the Crane, Doji-ue, then in this esteemed place it becomes absolutely reflexive. In any case...is that *all* you see out my window?"

Her smile fading, Hotaru looked back at the gardens, but this time her gaze skipped over them, over the palace wall and the cluttered rooftops of the city beyond, to the golden expanse of the distant Osari Plains. She couldn't see the Crane blood spilled upon them in her clan's ongoing feud with the Lion Clan, of course, but she knew it was there, drying under the late-spring sun.

Hotaru briefly considered just saying, "Yes, that is all," but shook her head instead. "No. I see an Empire in turmoil."

"An attack by bandits, even one so egregiously close to the Imperial Capital, hardly constitutes an 'Empire in turmoil.'"

Hotaru touched the sleeve of her kimono, feeling the bandage beneath a white crane embroidered into the pale-blue silk. A Seppun *shugenja* had offered to importune the elemental water *kami* to speed the healing of her wound, but she'd refused. As she'd told the Daidoji soldier who'd witnessed her battle with the ronin, she'd suffered worse injuries sparring with Kakita Toshimoko, her uncle and boisterous old sensei, and had only ever bandaged those as well...

The ronin. The man had been a criminal, and had earned his death.
Still.



Hotaru couldn't help but understand his motivations, at least in part. Three years ago, a devastating tsunami had ravaged the Crane Clan's coastline, destroying some of the clan's most fertile lands. No one knew how long it would be before the lands would again yield rice at all, much less in the abundance for which the Crane were known. The people were hungry, and they would only get hungrier.

Shizue frowned. "You are genuinely troubled, aren't you?"

"The ronin who led the bandits was not entirely without honor. His intent was to secure food for his followers and their families. That is why I allowed him die as a samurai, in combat, rather than face execution as a common criminal."

"Well, you must give me a full accounting of it all. As storyteller to the Imperial Court, I am always eager for new tales to tell. This one will not only entertain the court but also bolster your reputation."

"Always the storyteller," Hotaru said, shaking her head. "Anyway, yes, I agree that a single bandit attack does not portend the doom of the Empire. But when the bandits are peasants, simply seeking food..." She touched the bandage again. "And famine is only one of the difficulties we face. Our disagreement with the Lion over the ownership of Toshi Ranbo drags on. I must travel there soon, in fact, to evaluate the situation for myself. To the north, the Dragon seek our help in dealing with a growing sect of dissidents and heretics, but we have little to offer them. To the south, the Crab are badly pressed on the Carpenter Wall, but we have little help to offer there, either. And with each passing day, the Scorpion grip on the Imperial Court grows ever tighter..."

Hotaru made herself stop. "But then," she went on, "there are *always* problems afflicting the Empire, aren't there? Perhaps I am simply not yet used to my role as clan champion."

Hotaru swept her naginata through the final movements of the kata called One-Strike Blade, then stopped, assuming a resting stance. Kakita Toshimoko nodded from where he stood beneath a nearby sakura tree, opening his mouth to offer...something, but Doji Satsume spoke first, cutting him off.

"That was very good, my daughter."

Hotaru bowed. "Thank you, Father."

"Do not thank me," Satsume said, his face stone. "Very good is merely a guest house on the road to perfection—a place to visit briefly, not to stay. You, Hotaru, seem to have made it your home. Someday, you will lead our clan. If that leadership is merely very good, then you will have failed."

That had been...a year and a half ago? So, only a few months before Satsume had stepped down as clan champion, elevating Hotaru in his place. She had never heard him comment on the quality of her leadership of the Crane since, not even to say if it was *very good*.

And now he was dead.





Doji Hotaru - Indomitable Champion of the Crane Clan



Shizue leaned on her cane. "If I may be so bold," Shizue said, "I would agree that your newness to the position may be an issue. Take your arrival here. As exciting as it turned out, why in the world were you traveling with that caravan in the first place, rather than with the official entourage to which you are due? And in secret, at that?"

"Thanks to the bandits, it is not much of a secret now, is it?" Hotaru said, waving a dismissive hand. "I simply wished to arrive in Otosan Uchi discreetly, to gain some time to learn what I could about Satsume's death before the inevitable fanfare caught up with me."

"A bold, even rash thing to do—certainly not something Father would have done. Which is why I suspect you attempted it."

Hotaru just looked out the window.

"Well," Shizue went on, "you would have just run headlong into the Emerald Magistrates and their investigation regardless. The death of the Emerald Champion is no small matter."

"Perhaps, but it does not matter now, does it? I have no choice now but to accept whatever the official sources are prepared to share."

Shizue sniffed and made a fractional adjustment to another ikebana arrangement, this one near the window. "There are still somewhat less-than-official sources available, one of whom is standing right in front of you. The most important skill of a storyteller is the ability to listen, after all."

"Very well. What has this less-than-official source heard?"

"That Satsume's death remains a complete mystery. He appears to have simply...died. That has, of course, led to all sorts of speculation among the rumormongers."

"Such as?"

"Some say the Fortunes simply decreed it was his time to return to the Karmic Wheel. Others suggest more...nefarious causes."

Hotaru narrowed her eyes. "This is not one of your stories, Shizue. The dramatic flair is unnecessary."

Shizue smiled and minutely adjusted the ikebana again. "Something else that has become ingrained, I'm afraid. Anyway, some suggest his death was neither natural nor accidental, and that now the Emerald Championship is available for those who might covet it."

"If that is the finding of the magistrates, then a price will be demanded in blood."

"Not least by our brother."

Hotaru sighed. "Indeed. Kuwanan-kun certainly has not felt the need to wait for the magistrates' findings. He is already demanding blood in the name of our clan's honor."

Shizue leaned on her cane. "Lord Satsume was his—our—father. I suspect family honor also fuels his outrage." She cocked her head. "As I would expect it does yours?"

Hotaru turned back to the window. "The death of Doji Satsume, Emerald Champion, is indeed a grave matter. His death is a great loss to the Empire. And if it does turn out he was murdered, then yes, there will be blood—a great deal of it. Perhaps there will even be war."



She looked down into the garden. “The death of Doji Satsume, our father, however...” She paused, her gaze on a koi pond surrounded by colorful hibiscus. “Perhaps that is simply justice finally done.”

A long moment passed. Finally, Shizue said, “Our mother’s death was, in the end, her own choice—”

“A choice she never should have been forced to make,” Hotaru snapped, turning. “Father might as well have pushed her off that cliff himself—”

A soft tap at the door interrupted her. Shizue gave Hotaru a puzzled look, then hobbled past the shōji screens to the door. She opened it to see a servant who immediately bowed to the floor, then moved aside, letting someone else enter.

Hotaru’s breath caught as she recognized the new arrival. Bayushi Kachiko, Imperial Advisor of Rokugan—

—*and the most beautiful woman in the Empire.*

Fighting the desire to smile, to rush at Kachiko and embrace her, Hotaru simply bowed. So did Shizue, but more deeply, as befit her status relative to that of the woman who advised the Emperor himself. At the same time, both automatically assumed a perfect façade of formality.

“Bayushi Kachiko-dono,” Hotaru said. “What a pleasant surprise. To what do we owe the honor of a visit from the esteemed Imperial Advisor?”

Kachiko, a crimson and black study in sinuous charm, returned their bows. “How could I not pay my respects to the honored Champion of the Crane Clan upon her arrival in the Imperial Capital?” Pausing to admire one of Shizue’s ikebana arrangements, she let her fingers brush a sprig of gardenia, whose meaning in *hanakotoba*, the language of flowers, was “secret love.” “It would appear, however, that there has been a significant breach of protocol, for which I must profusely apologize on behalf of the Imperial Court. We were given no proper notification of your coming to Otosan Uchi, much less of your having actually arrived.”

“It is not a matter of concern,” Hotaru said.

Kachiko’s eyes glinted through the minimal mask that framed them, leaving the rest of her features, as fine as delicate porcelain, exposed. “Nonsense. Rest assured that appropriate corrective action will be taken so that, in the future, you shall receive the recognition to which a clan champion is entitled.”

Each of the Scorpion’s movements was deliberate and calculated even as she spoke. From a kimono slit to reveal *almost* scandalous glimpses of her legs as she walked, to a head tilted just enough to expose a *barely* appropriate amount of shoulder, Bayushi Kachiko was all about effect—and that effect was the seductive promise of *more*.

Hotaru glanced at her sister. “Shizue-san, if I may presume upon your hospitality, would you allow us the use of your apartments for a brief time?”



“Of course, Doji-ue. It gives me an excuse to enjoy the gardens before the setting of Lady Sun. Fumio-chan, do not give our guests any trouble.”

The cat blinked back at Shizue, then knocked a writing brush onto the floor.

Shizue sighed, then bowed, turned, and walked out of the room, sliding the door closed behind her.

Hotaru and Kachiko maintained their air of courtly propriety for a moment after Shizue had gone, then broke into warm smiles. Kachiko stepped forward, taking Hotaru's hands in hers and opening her mouth to speak. Before she could, though, Hotaru pulled her closer, meaning to kiss her...

She hesitated at a stray thought—of her husband, now on his way to Shizuka Toshi to learn what he could about a recent attack by pirates and about the man, Yoritomo, who led them. Stopping herself, Hotaru simply looked into Kachiko's dark eyes instead.

A silent moment passed. *My heart*, Hotaru thought...*surely, Kachiko can hear it beating, so hard and quickly*. Kachiko finally broke the silence.

“So, Hotaru, what is the meaning of sneaking into the city, truly?” Kachiko put on an exaggerated look of mock suspicion. “Were you trying to avoid me?”

“Of course not. I merely was hoping to have some time to myself, before all of the inevitable ceremony wrapped around me like suffocating silk.”

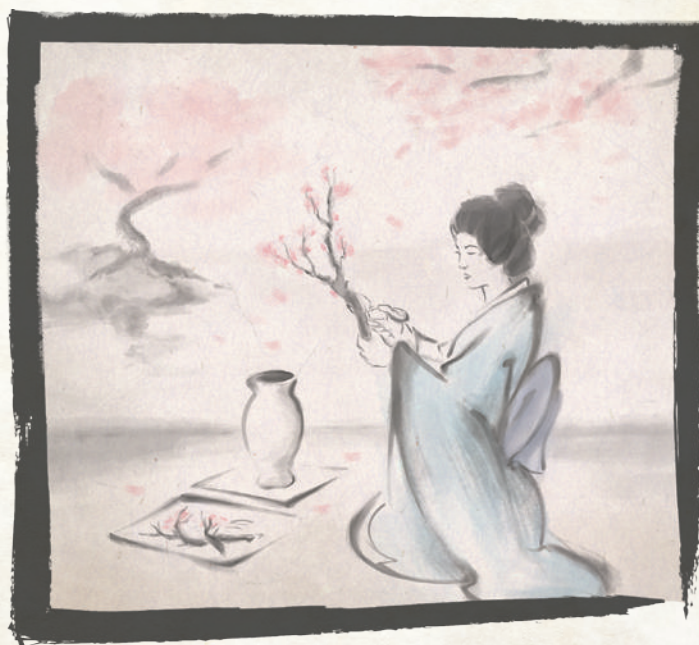
Kachiko released Hotaru's hands. “And why would you do that?”

It was Hotaru's turn to be mischievous. Offering a coy smile, she said, “Well, perhaps, rather than trying to *avoid* you, I wanted some quiet time to spend *with* you.”

An eyebrow lifted over the top of Kachiko's mask. “That can certainly be arranged. In fact, you must allow me to host you this evening. I have just procured some *sake* from Ryokō Owari Toshi that will make even one so discerning as the leader of the Crane Clan jealous.”

“I look forward to it.”

A moment passed, and then Kachiko drew back, her manner becoming more formal. “While it flatters me to think you were skulking your way into Otosan Uchi just to spend some time with me, that is not the reason for your somewhat... unwarranted discretion, is it?”



I think you were hoping to take advantage of the relative anonymity, however brief, to learn some unornamented truths about Lord Satsume's death."

"An obvious plan, then...and apparently not a very good one."

"On the contrary. Had you not involved yourself in an unseemly fight with bandits on the road, you might have gotten away with it."

Hotaru gave Kachiko, the woman known as the Mistress of Secrets, a wry look. "Really?"

"For a time. I may eventually come to know everything of note that goes on in this city, but *eventually* isn't *instantly*." Kachiko's expression became grave. "As for Lord Satsume...you have my deepest condolences, Hotaru. He was a great man, and an honored and loyal servant of the Empire. He will be missed."

Hotaru wanted to appear—to *be*—appropriately grief stricken, but she could only see the cliffs near Kyūden Doji. "He will be missed," was all she finally managed to say.

Kachiko's eyes narrowed at Hotaru's flat tone. "I am no stranger to problematic relationships with one's father...but if I may be presumptuous, Lord Satsume *is* dead, Hotaru. I would hate to see your bitterness toward him outlive him, at least for very long."

Hotaru looked at one of Shizue's shōji screens, depicting mountains stark against a red sunset. "I do not deny my bitterness. But it is more than that. The circumstances around his death are...troubling."

"Ah...yes. I understand that the Emerald Magistrates continue their investigation. Perhaps the secrecy of your arrival had some benefit after all, and you have heard something I have not?"

Hotaru turned her gaze on Fumio the cat, who'd settled himself onto a *tatami* mat near the ink brush he'd vanquished. Were this not Bayushi Kachiko, Hotaru might have thought she was actually concerned she had missed something...or that she might even be worried something was in the process of being discovered that wasn't meant to be. But this *was* Kachiko, so it was inconceivable that she wouldn't know exactly what the Emerald Magistrates had found so far.

...some suggest that his death was neither natural nor accidental, and that now the Emerald Championship is available for those who might covet it.

Kachiko's brother, Hametsu, *daimyō* of the Shosuro family, was reputed to be a master of poisons, more than capable of making it appear that someone had *simply...died*. And while there was little love lost between him and Kachiko, that they were both loyal to their clan was beyond question.

...with each passing day, the Scorpion grip on the Imperial Court grows ever tighter...

Hotaru looked up from the cat to find Kachiko watching her.



"No," Hotaru finally said. "I have heard nothing, aside from stray bits of gossip. Like everyone else, I can only wait for the Emerald Magistrates to complete their investigation."

A pause; then, Kachiko nodded. "Of course. In the meantime, do you intend to remain in the capital?"

"For the time being. There is a funeral to prepare. I had originally thought to have it at Kyūden Doji, but I think it would be more appropriate for it to be here, in Otosan Uchi."

"An appropriate choice indeed. If there is anything I can do to assist, you need but ask."

Hotaru took Kachiko's hand in hers. "Thank you. That means a great deal to me."

Kachiko placed her other hand over Hotaru's. "Now, I would love to stay, but I am afraid I have matters of court to attend to. I *do* expect to see you this evening, though."

Hotaru wanted nothing more than to be with Kachiko *now*, but she simply nodded. "Of course."

"Then I shall send a servant with the details. Until then..." Kachiko held Hotaru's hand in hers a moment longer, then released it and turned to the door. She and Hotaru exchanged appropriate bows, and then she was gone.

For a while, Hotaru simply stared at the door.

Eventually, she turned and walked back to the window. The play of light and shadow in the garden had changed with the movement of Lady Sun, making it seem a completely different place. Again, though, her gaze was drawn beyond it, to the horizon. Rice fields, fallow and empty...blood upon the Osari Plains...darkness pounding at the Carpenter Wall...heresy and sedition...

If Rokugan was the Emerald Empire, then the emerald was flawed—small cracks threatening to lengthen, to widen, to cause the whole of it to crumble to fragments and dust.

