

# The Price of Failure

By D.G. Laderoute

Mist had filled much of the Kintani Valley, blazing gold under the first rays of Lady Sun. Doji Kuwanan shaded his eyes and looked at Kyotei Castle, rising like a rocky island from a sea of radiant gold. He couldn't see the army encamped around it, submerged as it was in the glowing fog. But he knew it was there: much of the Crane force that had, until recently, wrestled with the Lion for control of Toshi Ranbo and the nearby Osari Plains. He needed that army, if he was going to successfully challenge his sister for championship of the clan. First, though, he must convince the man waiting for him in his tent, a few paces away.

He looked at the two pieces of paper in his hand. When the Miya courier had delivered them on behalf of Kakita Yoshi back in Otsan Uchi, he'd hoped they might contain something that would sway Daidoji Uji. Instead, their stunning contents just made everything far more complicated.

Kuwanan entered his tent. Uji was kneeling, contemplating a map spread across a tatami mat. It portrayed the region of Toshi Ranbo, as far south as the Imperial Capital. He bowed as Kuwanan entered; Kuwanan returned it, then knelt across the map from the Daidoji *daimyō*.

Without preamble, Kuwanan pointed at another place on the map—Kyūden Kakita, ancestral home of the Crane Clan's Kakita family. "It is here, Uji-san, that you should be directing your attention."

"May I ask why, Doji-sama?"

Kuwanan placed one of the two pages he had received from the Miya courier on the map. Its flowing script was rendered in crimson ink, signaling its dire importance.

"I have just received this from Kakita Yoshi in Otsan Uchi. The Lion Clan have seized Kakita Castle. Kakita Yoshi's wife is now a hostage."

Uji's dark eyes flicked up from the map. "That is...calamitous news. Why would they do this?"

Kuwanan remembered his recent confrontation with Tsuko, when a band of rōnin had brought him to her as a prisoner. If Tsuko believed Toturi was inadequate, he had no difficulty imagining the formidable woman taking charge of her clan.

"Part of it is, no doubt, Matsu Tsuko seeking vengeance for her betrothed, Arasou. However, I suspect Tsuko also seeks the Championship of her clan, taking it from Toturi. It would certainly be a way of ensuring her generals were united behind her."

Uji's knuckles whitened. "Tsuko takes one of our most important holdings to serve Lion internal politics? Without a proper declaration of war? That is..." He paused. "The word *insulting* is insufficient."



"Indeed," Kuwanan said, but considered how to craft his next words. Wasn't he seeking to do much what Tsuko had just done? Take the clan's Championship from the one currently holding it, because they were unsuited for it? Because they were unworthy?

"What of Akodo Toturi?" Uji asked, breaking the lingering silence. "Is he aware of this..." Uji hesitated. Kuwanan imagined he meant to say *treachery*, but that risked attaching the same word to Kuwanan's own moves against his sister, didn't it? Uji finally settled on, "...development?"

"I do not know. Yoshi-sama has said nothing about the Emerald Champion."

Uji's eyes lifted and stayed fixed on Kuwanan. "But he has said something else of importance."

Kuwanan avoided a frown. Uji was right—the capture of Kakita Castle wasn't the only problematic news in Yoshi's letter, by far. Am I so transparent? Or is Uji so canny? Either way, it struck Kuwanan that, if he did need to deceive Uji, he must be very careful how he went about it.

"He has," Kuwanan said. "Yoshi-sama also reports that the late Emperor issued an edict prior to his death, naming his younger son, Prince Daisetsu, as his heir. It also names Bayushi Shoji as regent, until Daisetsu comes of age."

The tent fluttered, billowing with a sudden breeze. The fog will soon be gone, Kuwanan thought.

Finally, Uji said, "That is a remarkable edict. Clearly, the news has not yet propagated far from the Imperial capital."

"No. Agasha Sumiko only recently presented it to the Imperial Court, then handed the proceedings over to Shoji as the new regent. Yoshi-sama says that the handwriting has been confirmed as the Emerald Champion's, and the signature that of the late Hantei."

"But you nonetheless have doubts as to its authenticity."

"Do you not? Is it not convenient that Shoji presents such a missive immediately after the Emperor's death?" Kuwanan scowled at the icon representing Otsan Uchi on the map. "It has the feel of...usurpation. And that is something I certainly would not put past Bayushi Shoji and that scheming wife of his."

Shoji's wife, Bayushi Kachiko. Just the thought of her made Kuwanan's knuckles whiten, much as Uji's had. Bad enough that his sister, Hotaru, dared to dishonor their father in favor of a clandestine relationship with that woman. But this dredged up an even more egregious possibility.



If the Scorpion really did seek to seize power, could Hotaru somehow be part of the plot?

“And what of the Emperor’s elder son, Sotorii?” Uji asked. “I find it difficult to believe that he will simply accede to all of this.”

Kuwanan placed the second document he had received from the Miya courier onto the map. “A timely question. This is from Sorai, daimyō of the esteemed Otomo family. He writes that Hantei Sotorii is being taken to the Monastery Among the Winds by an honor guard of Seppun. He also provides the details of the journey.”

“To what end?”

“It is rumored that the Otomo have grown to bitterly resent Scorpion influence in Imperial politics. I suspect this is Sorai-sama’s way of achieving some measure of retribution.”

Uji’s gave Kuwanan a keen look. “Only if someone were to act, in some fashion, on this information.”

“Indeed. Clearly, Sorai believes that something is amiss regarding this supposed edict.”

Kuwanan’s thoughts raced on from there. Sotorii would almost certainly be more than willing to contest it. To do that, however, he would need to be freed from his impending confinement in the Monastery Among the Winds. Because that is what this was—confinement. Shoju wanted Sotorii out of the way, but his death—so soon after of the Emperor and the revelation of the edict—would be far too suspicious. Any violence against the monastery itself was an unthinkable blasphemy. Yet Sorai had provided the precise routes and timings Sotorii and his honor guard would take to get to the monastery. That route would pass very close to Kyūden Kakita, which had just been taken by the Lion.

Kuwanan’s attention shifted across the map...from their present location at Kyūden Kyotei, to Kyūden Kakita...then from Ootosan Uchi, to the road that would lead to the Monastery Among the Winds...then back to Kyūden Kyotei.

Kuwanan nodded as a plan began to coalesce. It was a profoundly risky one. But turbulent times, such as these, often meant embracing such risks.

“Daidoji-sama,” he said, looking back up at the Daidoji daimyō, “I have a suggestion.”

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### *Five Days Later*

Kuwanan narrowed his eyes at a grey-brown smudge against the sky. Lady Sun’s gaze fell heavy and unrelenting on the earth, dessicating all roads to dust so that even a single traveler raised a gritty cloud marking their passage. This dust-cloud was, however, much more substantial. A group of a dozen or more traveled along the road traversing these Lion lands, near to the copse of poplars and birch where Kuwanan now stood. They might be Sotorii and his honor guard. Or, it might be a merchant caravan, or even a contingent of Lion troops. Until the scouts gave confirmation, Kuwanan and his army would stay where they were, concealed.

He sniffed at that. *His army*. If two-dozen bushi—all Kakita—plus a trio of rōnin scouts could be considered an army then, yes, this was *his army*. It was all Yoshi had been immediately able to offer to him, though. There were to have been many more, but thanks to the Lion and their seizure of Kyūden Kakita, that had understandably become the priority for the Kakita family.

Kuwanan looked back into the copse where *his army* now sheltered. That was something, at least—such a small force was agile and easy to hide. To anyone—particularly anyone from the Lion Clan—watching the march of Uji's army to Kyūden Kakita, Kuwanan's small contingent would have seemed just another scouting party, roving ahead of the main body of troops. It had been easy enough to break away and vanish into the rolling hills and scattered woods of the Lion lands south of the Kitsu Tombs, then take up a place of waiting close to the route that Otomo Sorai said would be used by Hantei Sotorii's honor guard.

Kuwanan shifted inside his armor, frowning at the sticky dampness of his own sweat. He glanced into the east, toward Kyūden Kakita and the battle Daidoji Uji would soon fight there. He had every confidence that Uji, a skilled tactician, would win the day. He further doubted Matsu Tsuko would really put much effort into holding the place, having achieved what she set out to do by attacking it in the first place. What Kuwanan *didn't* know was where Uji's loyalties lay in the aftermath.

He had clearly been stunned at Kuwanan's revelation about the shocking letter from Hotaru to Bayushi Kachiko he'd found hidden among the personal effects of Doji Satsume. When Kuwanan had then told Uji he intended to challenge his sister for Championship of the Crane, the Daidoji daimyō hadn't immediately declared him a traitor and taken him into custody. And now he marched to retake Kyūden Kakita at Kuwanan's suggestion. Still, he hadn't unequivocally thrown his lot in with Kuwanan. Now, Kuwanan's gaze into the east had become a frown. He'd deliberately avoided outright asking Uji for a declaration of loyalty; the man was the sort who, if pushed to a decision, would likely choose the contrary one. Still, Daidoji Uji would have to decide who to support, and soon, because—

"Lord Kuwanan," a nearby bushi said, "a rider approaches."

Kuwanan turned and saw a horseman galloping through the high grass toward them. It was one of the rōnin scouts. A short distance away, he reined in his horse and waved a piece of red silk. Then he wheeled his mount around and raced back toward the road.

"It is them!" Kuwanan called out, starting for the edge of the copse away from the road where the horses were tied. "Prince Sotorii and his honor guard approach!"

Kuwanan and *his army* rode from behind the copse and aimed themselves at a point just ahead of the dust-cloud. It took them only moments to cover the distance. They reined in their horses behind a small rise paralleling the road and dismounted, leaving two of the Kakita to hold their mounts while the rest climbed the rise, crouching as they reached the crestline.

There...less than a bow-shot to the east rode a column of armored Seppun warriors. And *there*, among them, a pair of unarmored figures. One would be Sotorii, the other probably an attendant.



Kuwanan drew his katana. The rest of the Kakita readied their own weapons. Kuwanan swept his gaze across them, saying, "Remember, the prince is not to be harmed."

He said nothing about the Seppun guardsmen. It was unnecessary. They would die in the imminent battle or would commit *seppuku* afterward. Such was the price of failure.

Silence. Then, a distant clomp of hooves. A cicada suddenly buzzed nearby. Kuwanan's grip tightened on his katana. The clatter of hooves grew louder.

Kuwanan raised his hand and swept it forward. As he did, he stood, charged over the crestline and plunged down a short, sandy embankment, crashing into the flank of the Seppun column.

A Seppun guardsman loomed over him. Kuwanan struck, slicing upwards, his blade finding a gap between armored plates and biting deep into flesh. The Seppun cried out, struck back a flailing blow with a *yari*, a broad-bladed spear; Kuwanan dodged aside, grabbed the *yari*, and yanked the man from his saddle, striking again when he slammed into the ground—a killing blow.

Kuwanan turned.

Shouts. Shrieking horses. Billowing dust.

The Seppun had been surprised, but they recovered quickly. One galloped past, *yari* leveled. Kuwanan ducked, the spearhead whistling past his ear. Another Seppun dismounted, katana drawn. Kuwanan slashed at him. The Seppun slashed back, then kicked at Kuwanan's knee. He leapt aside, struck side-handed. The Seppun dodged. Kuwanan closed in, delivered his own kick to the man's thigh. He staggered, briefly unbalanced. Kuwanan opened his throat with a flick of his blade.

Dust fogged the air. Kuwanan's breath rasped his throat. Sweat stung his eyes. More shouts. A scream, abruptly cut off. A riderless horse thundered by.

A Kakita bushi stumbled past, his face grimed with blood and dust. Kuwanan shoved past him, struck at another Seppun's leg, hamstringing him. He fell, and Kuwanan kicked the man's helmet forward, exposing the back of his neck. Kuwanan slashed it, truncating the Seppun's spine. The man slumped like a dropped sack.

Kuwanan paused. He gasped for air, spitting gritty saliva and wiping at greasy sweat. He looked around, katana ready. He could see...four paces, maybe, then the world vanished into swirling tan and vague silhouettes. The racket of battle diminished. He saw a Kakita bushi



slathered in grime and sweat, spattered with blood and nodded at the man. The Kakita nodded back. Another Kakita appeared out of the dust, seeking an opponent.

Kuwanan turned. Sucked in a breath that tasted like hot dirt.

"Your Highness!"

A shout. But it wasn't an answer. Somewhere, lost in the dust, someone still fought.

"Prince Sotorii!"

"Here! I am here!"

Kuwanan rushed toward the voice. A figure, still on horseback, loomed over him. "Your Highness, are you injured?"

"I...no! Who are you?"

"Doji Kuwanan, your Highness. We have come to help you to rightfully claim your Throne!"

Sotorii gaped down at Kuwanan. Opened his mouth—

A shout.

A warning.

Kuwanan spun around. Swept his katana sideways, deflecting a blow. Not all of the Seppun were dispatched—

No. This was not a Seppun. Her mon was a coiled dragon.

*Dragon Clan?*

*What—?*

The woman, a Mirumoto, struck at Kuwanan again. He took the blow on his armor, biting a chunk from the lacquered leather. Grabbing the woman's arm, he pulled, yanking her off-balance, then swept his katana past her face. She staggered back. Kuwanan jammed a foot behind her leg, tripping her. She fell, hitting the road with a heavy thud. Kuwanan slammed his heel down on her throat, leaving her gasping in the dirt, her face purpling.

*Dragon Clan. Mirumoto. Here. How?* They had seen no second dust cloud. The Dragon must have followed Sotorii's party through the fields alongside the road, a harder journey. But why were they here at all?

Kuwanan spun back toward Sotorii, but another figure blocked his way, katana in one hand, wakizashi in the other. It was *niten*, the paired-blade fighting style of the Mirumoto.

Once more, Kuwanan raised his katana. The muscles of his arm protested, burning with the effort. His lungs felt stuffed full of dust—

The figure lunged, striking from both left and right. Kuwanan dodged the katana and deflected the wakizashi with the armor of his left forearm. The blade scraped across the blue-lacquered leather. He struck back, getting his own katana inside his opponent's, but it struck her breastplate and ineffectually bounced back.

For a heartbeat, Kuwanan looked squarely into his opponent's face.

He knew her.





She'd been part of a Dragon delegation to Kyūden Doji, two years ago, maybe three. A striking, formidable woman. Unforgettable.

Mirumoto Hitomi.

Kuwanan likewise saw recognition in Hitomi's face.

Then surprise, that probably mirrored his own.

She looked like she might speak. Kuwanan seized the moment to strike again.

Hitomi backpedaled, then counterattacked. Fortunes, she was fast...and fresh, while Kuwanan flagged, dust and heat and exertion dragging at him. Hitomi's twin blades wove a flickering net of steel, forcing Kuwanan to dodge, sidestep...dodge and sidestep again. He desperately tried to find an opening, slashing, kicking, and punching. But Hitomi's blades were everywhere at once, a razor-edged blur.

Now Kuwanan's heart pounded, blood thundering in his ears like a temple gong. He couldn't get enough air. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't find enough air—

An opening. He redirected his blade, striking through it. His katana opened a shallow cut on her arm.

Pain blasted through his side as hers cut deep.

She had baited him, taking a minor injury to inflict one that might be grievous.

The world had become dust and pain, nothing else.

A yari struck past Kuwanan, driving Hitomi back. Someone grabbed him, pulled him back and away. He stumbled, but strong arms held him, pushed and urged him along. The dust thinned.

A horse. The Kakita bushi supporting Kuwanan shoved him astride it, shouting... something. He didn't understand, but it didn't matter. He got the horse moving.

The clamor of battle faded behind him, lost in the rush of wind, the pound of hooves.

Grimly, Kuwanan hung onto the horse. Other riders surrounded him. They were few.

His *army*, or what remained of it.

New pain blossomed with each hoof-beat. Kuwanan gritted his teeth and fought to remain conscious.

The Dragon must have been following Sotorii.

Why?

Because the Dragon supported the Scorpion...?

So why had Otomo Sorai said nothing about it? Because he didn't know?



Or was it a betrayal?  
That didn't matter now.  
What did was failure.  
Because failure had its price.  
It always did.

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Mirumoto Hitomi stood atop the embankment watching Kuwanan and the surviving Crane gallop away. She considered giving chase. But these were Lion lands, so let the Lion hunt them down. She would stay on the Imperial road, having done what Shoju had asked of her, ensuring Prince Sotorii reached the Monastery Among the Winds.

That the Crane Champion's younger brother had tried to prevent that had profound implications. But that could wait as well. Right now, she needed to ensure Prince Sotorii was unharmed.

Wincing at her injured arm, Hitomi turned back to the scene of battle. The choking dust was clearing, revealing horses milling about. Dead and wounded Seppun, Crane, and Dragon sprawled in the road or the dry grass along it. She looked for Sotorii...

Frowned.

She didn't see him.

A Mirumoto bushi climbed the embankment and bowed.

"We have secured the area, Mirumoto-sama."

"Where is Prince Sotorii?"

The man shook his head. "I do not know. His horse is here, as is his retainer, but the Prince himself is nowhere to be found."

Hitomi shaded her eyes and scanned the surrounding landscape. To the horizon in every direction, she saw rolling, grassy fields...scattered copses of trees and scrubby clumps of bush...innumerable hummocks and hollows.

She puffed out a sigh.

Sotorii must have fled.

And now, with dozens, perhaps hundreds of places to hide...

They might never find him.

