

Tiger Stalks His Prey

By D.G. Laderoute

Only in the gardens was the Forbidden City quiet enough for Akodo Toturi to work through his thoughts. Thanks to a successful counteroffensive, the balance of power at Toshi Ranbo was shifting; meanwhile, the Unicorn had made their own play for Hisu Mori Mura. Matsu Tsuko awaited the orders to raise all their banners for war—orders he had to give. Poor Kaede's nightmares had intensified until the day when her father had mysteriously left Otosan Uchi—

Kaede said that she could not even sense him in the Void. How was that even possible, unless Lord Ujina had cloaked himself from her on purpose?

Now, she could not sleep at all, and trying only made her headaches and nausea worse. Toturi could not quiet his own worries and thoughts long enough to fall asleep for more than an hour or so at time. It was as though he were drifting through a haze, his thoughts spiraling in on themselves, or leading nowhere at all.

He stopped at the edge of a koi pond surrounded by immaculately trimmed grass. Several retainers sat in a *chashitsu*, a tea house, overlooking the pond, while a squad of Seppun Honor Guards stood at their posts around the clearing.

A lone figure near the pond worked through the movements of a *kata*: Tiger Stalks His Prey, an exercise designed to emphasize patience and control through slow, deliberate movements that echo a great cat on the hunt. It was a basic form, one learned early and used frequently by most bushi. Yet the practitioner was no young samurai in training, but Hantei XXXVIII, the Emperor of Rokugan himself.

The Emperor progressed from the *kata*'s fifth movement to its sixth...its sixth to its seventh. If it were not above his station, he would have criticized the Emperor's transition between movements, the placement of his feet, the angle of his shoulders, the tilt of his head. All were slightly off, motions that should be smooth instead slightly hesitant, even halting. The katana trembled visibly in his hands. But it was not his place to judge the Son of Heaven.

The Emperor stumbled, losing his balance amid the eighth movement. He caught himself before toppling over, paused, then began again from the beginning of the seventh movement.

The faces of the attendants and retainers in the tea house were stone, betraying no hint of disapproval over the Hantei's struggle.

"My apologies, Akodo-san," came a voice from just behind Toturi. "It is unfortunate you had to see that...unseemly display."

The voice belonged to Hantei Sotorii, the Emperor's eldest son and heir to the throne. Another pair of Honor Guard stood behind him, their faces dutifully bland. Toturi immediately





bowed, then straightened and glanced back at the Emperor. The elder Hantei simply continued with the kata, but one of his attendants in the tea house, a member of the Otomo family, had raised her fan to cover her face. If she had overheard Sotorii's remark, then surely the Emperor had, too.

"It rained the day I returned from Toshi Ranbo, your highness," Toturi said.

The boy gave a puzzled frown. "It rained...?" He shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't understand, Akodo-san."

"Since you are apparently offering apologies on behalf of the Heavens, I thought I might receive one for the rain that made the last portion of my journey so unpleasant."

Sotorii kept his face very still as he mulled over the words. Toturi simply waited, for the young Hantei to speak, or leave, or continue whatever he'd been doing before he felt it necessary to apologize on behalf of the man whose actions and words were sacrosanct.

The confusion on the boy's face gave way to sudden understanding, and then to a hard, dark anger. "You presume too much, Akodo-san."

Toturi bowed deeply. "You are, of course, correct, Your Highness. I do presume too much. I presume things on behalf of the Heavens, which is wrong and unworthy of me. I hope you will accept my most sincere apologies."

Sotorii's glare intensified. "And I hope you find your tenure as Emerald Champion fulfilling, Akodo-san...for as long as it lasts." The young Hantei wheeled and stalked away, his guards falling in behind him. Toturi held his bow until Sotorii had vanished among a stand of sakura trees shading one of the several paths leading away from the koi pond.

Toturi straightened. *I should not anger the crown prince, especially amid everything else going on.* He was, after all, heir to the throne. But the boy wasn't Emperor yet. And his station, worthy of respect or not, certainly didn't entitle him to speak poorly of the man who not only *was* Emperor, but was also his father—

"Akodo-san."

Toturi turned again. The Emperor walked toward him, dabbing his face with a snow-white cloth. A young attendant followed discreetly behind, carrying several more.

Toturi dropped to his knees and prostrated himself in the grass. The Emperor stopped. "Please, Emerald Champion, rise."

Toturi did so. "You wished to speak with me, Your Majesty."

The Emperor nodded and continued wiping his face, which shone with exertion and sweat, like that of a man who had just labored hard and at length. A kata should be demanding, yes, but not so much that it left its practitioner looking so...flushed, and so worn out.

The Emperor finally handed the cloth to the attendant, who immediately offered another. The Emperor waved him away and said, "Indeed I do, Akodo-san, but...not here. You may await me in the Shrine to the Kami Hantei, while I bathe and refresh myself."

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

Toturi bowed and withdrew. As he did, he saw that the Emperor finally did accept another cloth from the attendant, using it to wipe yet more sweat from his face.

Toturi shifted as he knelt in the Shrine to Hantei, finding a more comfortable position for his legs. He glanced at the door through which the Emperor would eventually enter, then lifted another scroll from the pile that had been presented to him by an earnest herald of the Miya family. He could try to defer the paperwork until another time, when he was more rested, but he had no idea how long he would be waiting for the Emperor, and no idea whether some new crisis would add to his worries.

The scroll was yet another edict for his review, prior to its promulgation. This one concerned a revision to the tax rate on barley. It was likely important in its own way, and it certainly seemed to fall within the purview of the Emerald Champion, the chief enforcer of the Emperor's law and therefore also its chief tax collector. The bureaucrats who had drafted it assuredly understood their craft and the need for such particulars, so he simply affixed his chop to the scroll, endorsing it under his office, and set it to one side of the lacquered table. The next few scrolls were equally esoteric administrative minutia, and then there was only one scroll left.

Toturi opened it...and frowned.

At the top of the scroll were the customary opening words, "An edict..." and nothing else. The remainder of the scroll was as blank as the unadorned walls around him.

Toturi put the scroll aside. An error, obviously: one he would take up with the Miya functionary who had delivered the scrolls to him. Someone would pay dearly for such an egregious error, which was unfortunate, but "that which is not perfect is failure" was apparently how the Imperial bureaucracy worked—

A soft rasp broke the serene silence as the door to the chamber slid open. Toturi had expected the Miya, not the Emperor himself unceremoniously entering, followed by a young man carrying an ornate tea service. After receiving Toturi's obeisance, the Hantei knelt on a cushion on the opposite side of the room's only table, then waved a hand toward the Miya.



"I have recently come to enjoy the tea known as Crystal Blossom," said the Emperor, "which is grown by the esteemed Dragon. It apparently thrives in their high mountains, but only close to where the trees give way to the perpetual snows. I hope you find it as pleasant as I do, Akodo-san."

"I am sure I shall, Your Majesty," Toturi said, while the Miya laid out the tea service. The Miya then began the abbreviated form of the tea ceremony, known as *chakai*. When he had finished, Toturi sipped the steaming infusion. It was both cloyingly sweet and sharply bitter, and generally more pungent than pleasant. But he offered a satisfied nod to the Emperor, and another to the Miya, who bowed deeply, gathered the unneeded pieces of the tea service, and withdrew.

The Hantei no longer looked as flushed as he had in the garden. Now he simply looked... tired. Tired and...old. Like the older monks with whom Toturi had become acquainted during his time in the monastery. Even the way the teacup trembled in his hand...

"Now, then," the Emperor said, setting down the cup and gesturing at the pile of scrolls, "I trust you have had time to review these documents?"

"I have, Your Majesty."

Here come the sundry bureaucratic bits and pieces... But the Hantei picked up the strangely empty scroll and placed it on the table between them.

"Tell me, Akodo-san...what did you think of this one?"

Toturi kept his face as blank as the scroll. Surely the Emperor realized there was nothing written on the paper...did he not?

The Hantei offered a thin smile. "Do not worry, Akodo-san. I am well aware that there is nothing written here. At least, not yet."

"I...am sorry, Your Majesty. I do not understand—"

"What are your thoughts regarding Prince Sotorii?"

This time, Toturi couldn't suppress a startled blink. He took a moment to place his own teacup down. Was the Emperor was testing him? Was this the Hantei's way of probing into the character of his new Emerald Champion?

"He is...a determined young man," Toturi finally offered.

"The perfect response, of course. Perfect in the same way that you could say that I have set a new standard for the performance of Tiger Stalks His Prey. It is true, but not necessarily flattering."

"Your Majesty, I—"

The Emperor held up a hand. "That is not a criticism, Akodo-san. It is merely an... observation." The Hantei looked at his teacup. "The fact is that my eldest son is not merely determined. He is arrogant and willful and, dare I say it, can even be cruel."

Toturi said nothing. It was, of course, the Emperor's prerogative to say such things about his son and heir if he wished, but it would be inappropriate for even the Emerald Champion

to do more than simply acknowledge that they had been said—if even that. So he kept his face carefully blank and simply waited for the Emperor to go on.

“You needn’t respond to that, Akodo-san,” the Hantei said. “You bore some of the brunt of his behavior just a short time ago.” The Hantei gave a small and rueful smile. “He is no Hantei XVI, yet I am afraid that Sotorii knows not the path he walks—and where his journey might lead the rest of the Empire. With proper guidance and tutelage, I believe he might one day become a strong and capable leader, but...”

“He is young,” Toturi said, “and the young are given to passion, often at the expense of more considered and thoughtful words and deeds. Learning the wisdom to put aside passion is very much part of maturing.”

“Indeed. Learning such wisdom should be an incremental and progressive thing, demonstrated by children as they grow into adults, yes? Yet, in the case of Sotorii...”

The Emperor left his words hanging in the placid air of the shrine. Toturi could reply, *You are right, Your Majesty, he would not be a good Emperor. Certainly not now—and perhaps not ever.* But was it wasn’t Toturi’s place, even as Emerald Champion, to say such a thing. Perhaps he should just reiterate that *Sotorii is young, and yes, he is immature, but he may be able to learn and grow.* And in any case, *he is your heir, Your Majesty, so what difference does any of this make?*

The silence persisted, gently punctuated by the fitful ring of wind chimes somewhere outside the shrine. Toturi frantically sought an answer, realizing he had to say...something, even if this entire conversation seemed somehow inappropriate.

“Your Majesty,” Toturi finally offered, “we have all watched as children grow, becoming young samurai, and then continuing to mature as they gain years and experience. Some do so very quickly. Others follow a more...indirect path.” Toturi touched his teacup but didn’t pick it up. “I am sure that Prince Sotorii will find and follow the path that is right for him...one that will ultimately lead him to wisdom and thoughtful judgment.”

Inwardly, Toturi winced at his own words. *Your wife, Kaede, believes she may be with child, but is not yet certain...and yet, here you presume to give insight into the maturation of children. You are presumptuous, just as Sotorii said.*

But if the Emperor considered Toturi’s words presumptuous, he gave no sign of it. Instead, he looked up from his teacup and met the Akodo’s gaze squarely. Toturi had, of course, never made such direct eye contact with the Hantei before. He noticed now, and with surprise, that the Emperor’s eyes were clouded, as though thin, pale fog filled the space behind his pupils. But as murky as they were, sudden purpose still charged them.

“Perhaps you are right, Akodo-san,” the Emperor said. “But we are not discussing some young samurai of one of the clans. We are discussing the heir to the Throne of Rokugan—an heir whose father’s frailty seems to increase by the day.” The Emperor paused, and Toturi saw his gaze flick to the blank scroll, linger there a moment, and then return to meet his own.



"Sotorii is not ready to sit on that throne. My heart tells me that he may never be. I said he was arrogant and willful and cruel... but it is not just that. There is a darkness within him... a shadow cast across his soul by something that I do not understand. But if I am, indeed, to soon ascend to the blessed afterlife of Yomi, then upon that throne he *will* sit."

Once again, silence and wind chimes. *Should I protest the Emperor's dire prediction of his own death? Would that not just ring shallow and patronizing? And should I agree—or disagree—with the Emperor's stunningly harsh assessment of his own son?*

Still, Toturi needed to say *something* in response. He opened his mouth, ready to craft what he hoped would be appropriate words, but the Emperor started speaking again.

"I cannot...*will* not...allow that to happen. The Empire needs a strong ruler now, perhaps more than it has in a very long time. But that strength must be tempered with reason, reflection, and a willingness to listen and consider and compromise. That ruler is not Sotorii. It is my younger son, Daisetsu."

Toturi frowned, and his frown deepened as he thought through the trajectory of the Emperor's thoughts and words. "I beg your pardon, Your Majesty...are you suggesting that you would name Prince Daisetsu as your heir, rather than his older brother?"

The Emperor picked up the scroll that was blank, except for the words "An edict," and placed it on the table before him. "I am not merely suggesting it, Akodo-san, I am declaring that is my intent." He looked up from the scroll, again meeting Toturi's eyes. "But that is not all. It is my further intent to abdicate and retire, passing the throne to my younger son. And since he is not yet of age, he will ascend as Emperor, under the guidance of a regent, someone themselves strong and capable, who can help him become the ruler I believe he can and will be. That regent shall be the esteemed Bayushi Shojiu."

Toturi stared.

Later, he would acknowledge an unseemly pride in not allowing his mask to drop and reveal the depth of his shock at the Emperor's words. In the moment, though, he could only sit and



stare at the Hantei.

The Emperor abdicating...it had only happened a handful of times across history.

Sotorii passed over...how would the tempestuous young man react?

Daisetsu ascending instead, the new Emperor...his gempuku would have to be hastened, plunging him into adulthood before he was truly ready.

Bayushi Shoju as regent...Bayushi Shoju...!

Sotorii will not be Emperor. Thank the Kami for that.

Yet...is Shoju not the same, although cunning instead of cruel?

For the first time in his life, he did not know where this path would lead. But as Emerald Champion, his path would inevitably be intertwined.

What will I do?

“Your Majesty...this is...momentous. I apologize for requiring a moment to...to consider it.”

The Emperor nodded. “I understand, Akodo-san. *Momentous* is an excellent word to describe what I have just said.”

Toturi looked at his teacup...picked it up...put it down again.

Bayushi Shoju...?

“Your Majesty,” he said, then paused. He was about to say the very shallow and patronizing thing he stopped himself from saying only a moment ago. But that was before the Emperor had declared his intent to place the Scorpion Clan Champion on the throne as regent. Taking another breath, he said, “Is this...necessary? Your reign may yet be long and fruitful—”

“Long?” the Emperor cut in, a wry smile briefly touching his face. “It has already been blessedly long. My difficulty with *Tiger Stalks His Prey* is but one symptom of my growing infirmity...one of an ever-greater multitude of such symptoms.” The smile faded, and the Emperor looked, if possible, even more drawn and tired than he had before.

“Your Majesty, no shugenja would as much as hesitate to pray on your behalf for health—”

“It is a defiant man who asks the Heavens to forestall his judgment before Emma-Ō.

“Frankly, Akodo-san,” he went on, waving a hand at the scrolls on the table, “I can no longer read documents such as these. Only if the script is rendered foolishly large can I even hope to discern what they say.” The Emperor sighed. “If I cannot read, then I must trust solely in the words of my advisors. And an Emperor so trusting as to have others perceive the world for him—even if out of necessity—is an Emperor open to manipulation.”

The Hantei shook his head. “No. I cannot allow unfounded optimism, or my own pride, to stand in the way of what I know, deep within me, is what must be. It is the Empire I am thinking of. Every day, it seems, heralds arrive with yet more dire news from across Rokugan.” The Emperor smiled again, but this time it was bleak and humorless. “In myriad ways, Tengoku itself seems to be saying that the time has come for me to retire.”

“I cannot believe that, Your Majesty.”

“How can you not, Akodo-san? Besides the many difficulties facing the clans, there is now



the promise of war among them. Even setting aside the growing conflict between your own clan and the Crane over Toshi Ranbo, there is the matter of Hisu Mori Mura. Honor would demand that the defeat of your kin there by the Unicorn must be answered by your clan.”

“Your Majesty—”

“Do you deny it, Akodo-san?”

Toturi folded his hands in his lap. Hosokawa Tesshū had only arrived in the Imperial Capital two days earlier with news of the battle, so he hadn’t yet decided how to proceed. Except...hadn’t he? With Hisu Mori Mura coming so soon after the insult of Shinjo Altansarnai’s broken betrothal to the Ikoma *daimyō*, did he doubt, really, that the Lion had any choice but to petition the throne for the right to make war on the Unicorn?

The Emperor shook his head slowly. “Of course you do not deny it, Akodo-san, because you cannot. And even if you somehow *did* find a rationale for doing so, do you really believe that your generals—that your *clan*—would accept it?”

Toturi finally shook his own head. “No, Your Majesty.”

“There was a time, Akodo-san, when I believe I could have prevented many of these things troubling the Empire—and mitigated those I could not. But that time is long behind me. Now, I am an old man, of failing health. If I do nothing, Sotorii will become Emperor upon my passing...and that shadow upon his soul will spread, I fear, plunging the Empire even further into chaos and darkness. I cannot allow that to happen.”

Toturi took a long, slow breath and simply stared into his teacup as he considered the Emperor’s words. He wanted to continue objecting, to persuade the Emperor that he was wrong, that he should remain on the throne, that abdication and naming his younger son as heir would be massive upheaval, its outcome unpredictable and dangerous for the Empire...

But.

But, he saw a profound wisdom in the Emperor’s words. Sotorii *was* dangerous, and in a way that *was* predictable. It was more than simply arrogance or a mercurial nature. Samurai once tried to convince themselves that the young man who would become Hantei XVI, the so-called Steel Chrysanthemum, was merely *arrogant and willful* and would, over time, grow into a wise and just ruler. Instead, he had been cruel, paranoid, and destructive, so much so that his own Seppun guards and samurai from the clans had finally killed him rather than risk letting his malignant reign tear the Empire apart at its seams. And that had been a time when the Empire was in a place of relative peace and stability. A new Steel Chrysanthemum, ascending now, could very well plunge Rokugan into a turmoil from which it might never recover.

So, abdicating and naming Daisetsu his successor was, indeed, the best decision for the Empire.

But Bayushi Shoji as regent...?

Toturi looked back at the Emperor. “Have you informed anyone else about your intentions, Your Majesty?”



"I have not. Indeed, I have only recently come to this decision." The Emperor gave Toturi a keen look. "Nonetheless, I would hear your thoughts on this, Emerald Champion."

Toturi nodded at the Emperor's specific use of his title. He did not wish to hear what Toturi the man had to say, nor Toturi of the Akodo, nor Toturi, Champion of the Lion Clan.

"Very well, Your Majesty. I see your wisdom in this, despite the potential for disruption and unrest. I believe Prince Daisetsu would be an excellent Emperor—one who could, with the correct and appropriate guidance, lead the Empire through this time of troubles and unite it into an age of peace and prosperity."

"There will, of course, be those who will see this upending of tradition as an affront," the Emperor said. "Some may remain loyal to Sotorii-san regardless."

"That is a risk, Your Majesty. But like yours, my heart tells me that it is better to unite the Empire behind Prince Daisetsu in due course, than to more quickly unite it *against* your eldest son."

The Emperor looked at Toturi for a moment, then poured more tea into both their cups. "It is most heartening to hear you say this, Akodo-san. But it is what you do not say that interests me more."

Toturi nodded. "I admit, Your Majesty, to profound misgivings about your intent to name Lord Bayushi as regent."

The Emperor sipped tea. "And what is the nature of those...misgivings?"

Toturi found himself tensing. He must tread carefully here. Even as Emerald Champion, he didn't have free license to denigrate a clan champion. Moreover, he knew that Shoji was the Emperor's friend. Perhaps his closest confidant.

"Bayushi," Toturi said, "is, clearly, a strong and capable leader for his clan. He has placed the Scorpion into a position of preeminence in the Empire. For that, he is to be respected, even admired."

The Emperor nodded and sipped more tea, but said nothing.

"My misgivings arise from that same truth," Toturi went on. "I am concerned that Lord Bayushi may find it...difficult...to place the interests of the Empire, and the clans as a whole, above those of the Scorpion." He paused, then steeled himself to go on. "And even if he is able to do so, I am perhaps more concerned that others, in a position to influence him, may not."

"You speak of Lady Kachiko."

Not just her, Toturi thought, remembering how Bayushi Aramoro, Shoji's own half brother, had sought to cheat at the Test of the Emerald Champion... He thought of others, a legion of them—Scorpion sycophants, schemers, and manipulators—who would try to benefit from having their champion effectively upon the throne.

"She is ambitious," Toturi said. "She will, I think, seek to exploit the power that regency will give her husband."

"Could not the same thing be said about virtually anyone I name as regent, Akodo-san?"



That there will be those who have their confidence, and could seek to use it for their own interests? For that matter...isn't that already true for me?"

Was he hearing Bayushi Kachiko's words now? She was, after all, the Imperial Advisor, and had the Emperor's ear whenever she wished.

...an Emperor so trusting as to have others perceive the world for him—even if out of necessity—is an Emperor open to manipulation.

Still, there was little point in pursuing this further. The scroll had only appeared blank; the Emperor had already decided what would be written upon it. Now, Toturi could only seek to shape and contain what was about to be unleashed upon the Empire.

"Again, Your Majesty, I am humbled by your wisdom," was all he finally said.

The Emperor nodded and called for a servant to bring him a brush and ink. When they were placed before him, the Emperor pushed them, and the blank scroll, toward Toturi.

"Just as my eyes have begun to fail me, Akodo-san, so too is my brush too unsteady to write. And I will not have such an important missive written by any mere functionary. You must write it for me."

The words nearly knocked him to the floor. Such a momentous order, written not in the Emperor's own hand but that of his champion.

Would the other clans see him as manipulator? Had that been Shoji's plan all along?

He could not write this. But neither could he possibly protest or give voice to those words. He could not disobey his lord the Emperor.

The Emperor was correct, of course. No mere scribe or bureaucrat could pen this, a document that promised to shake Rokugan as severely as any earthquake. And coming from the Emerald Champion, instead of Chancellor Kakita Yoshi or Advisor Bayushi Kachiko...it was the most neutral option the Emperor had.

Taking a slow breath, Toturi pushed the teacup aside. Arranging the scroll before him, he dipped the brush into the ink, and as the Emperor began to dictate, Toturi began to write.

The ink of his brush seemed to wound the paper like a sword, leaving trails of black blood in its wake.



Was this how you felt, Hotaru, when you wrote to me of your sorrow? You did not know where your words would lead us, but the deed had already been done.

But these words were heavier than even the death of a clan champion—or a brother. This scroll, this particular piece of paper, was likely the most important he would ever write. No, this scroll would be the most important one that would be written—during his lifetime, at least.

“An edict...

“...from His August Imperial Majesty, Hantei XXXVIII...”

When finished, the missive was brief, barely filling half the page. It was clearly in Toturi's own hand, which Sotorii would no doubt see and recognize.

The Emperor retrieved the scroll from Toturi. “My thanks for your assistance in this, Akodo-san. I shall have this promulgated tomorrow, in court.” Cloudy eyes met his. “Is there anything else you wish to discuss with me today?”

“No, Your Majesty,” Toturi said, glancing at the scroll.

Right now, there were no other words that mattered more.

