

The Last Stone Played

By Robert Denton III

Hour of the Boar, The Forbidden City, The Imperial Domicile

The door to the family study creaked as Sotorii slid it aside. His father's back—hunched and emblazoned with the symbol of the chrysanthemum—drew his eye from the far side of the room. Perhaps this should wait until tomorrow. It was late in the evening, and his father was meditating anyway. He wouldn't want to be interrupted. Swallowing hard, Sotorii tamped down the thought. He'd waited too long already, and besides, surely his father had heard the door open. There was no backing down now.

Sotorii's eyes wandered as he crossed the room. He was intimately familiar with its contents, recalling lectures before generational artifacts, instructions on Bushidō in his father's displeased voice. Displeased, like he was now.

He stopped at a proper distance. His father sat in the lotus position, head lowered before the ancestral sword of the Hantei, like a stone idol. With the lines drawn by every object and piece of furniture leading the eye to him, it was as if the entire room was bowing to the Emperor.

"Father?"

The Hantei turned. The weight of his father's graying eyes flooded him like the moonlight through the paper screen that shielded the courtyard window.

"Sotorii," his father said, "why are you still up?"

Taking a deep breath, Sotorii folded into a bow, placing his forehead on the straw tatami floor. "I've come to apologize, father, for my recent behavior."

Silence. He searched his father's face, but as always, the Hantei's expression was unreadable.

His mind emptied. The speech he'd prepared, recited over and over in his bedroom, was gone. He was back at the ancestral shrine—his *gempuku* presentation—surrounded by the court and resplendent in emerald and gold. His father had looked at him the same way then. Those weathered eyes. A mouth that neither smiled nor frowned.

"Go on," said his father.

"I've...embarrassed you this year," he continued. His words were clumsy tar pouring from his mouth. "The...incident...at my *gempuku*..."

They were midway through the spring ceremony when he detected the servants' whispers, seen the two from across the shrine, heard the muted chuckles that followed. They had *all* heard, hadn't they? He remembered the peasants' faces when he shouted, how they cowered at his anger.

And the echoing snaps of opening fans, hiding reactions. His father's face, neither smiling nor frowning, as everyone looked away.

Sotorii's cheeks burned. He was a flooded well, his vision blurring as water bubbled up into his eyes. Was he just supposed to let them mock him? At his own gempuku? And now he was crying like a child. This is what they all wanted, wasn't it?

"But also, the...incident...with the Scorpion Champion's son." He grimaced. "And others. It has reflected poorly on the family..."

The back of his throat was sore, but he let his words come unrehearsed. "I know you are ashamed of me, father. I don't want you to be ashamed of me. How can I earn your forgiveness and return to your good graces?"

The Hantei regarded his son for a long time. "I have never heard you talk like that before." He gestured to his side. "Come here."

Was that forgiveness? Sotorii scrambled beside him, holding his breath as his father turned his gaze back to the enshrined sword.

"You are my son," he said. "Nothing will ever change that."

Sotorii settled in his seat with a relieved exhale. Already, the well was drying.

The squeaks in the hall signaled passing guards beyond the screen of the round window. The crickets keened in the tiered courtyard below. All was right here. He didn't need anyone else. Just his father.

And Kunshu. Sotorii regarded the resplendent ancestral sword of his family, the carved feathers of the wooden sheath seemed soft, almost real. There were times when Sotorii could not hear his own voice in his head, when the thoughts came too fast and out of order. But whenever he looked upon the sword, his heart slowed and the thoughts were clear and separated, like a prism for his mind.

"You are looking at Kunshu," his father observed.

"It's the greatest sword in the Empire," he breathed.

"Perhaps so," the Hantei said. "But have you ever looked at the sword beside it?" His ancient eyes twinkled faintly. "It is even greater than Kunshu, don't you think?"

The unadorned short blade sat in an unpolished



sheath, as though it had bored even its blacksmith into leaving it unfinished. Shori, the ancestral sword of the Lion.

“That sword,” Jodan continued, “is the deadliest in the Empire. It is far greater than Kunshu, not because of its forging, but because of the promise that Akodo made when he presented it to the first Emperor. For you see, when it is returned to the Lion Clan Champion, it carries the Emperor’s explicit approval to...”

Shori, better than Kunshu? Ridiculous. Shori wasn’t even Akodo’s actual sword. His actual sword was broken and discarded. Shori had never even been drawn. And, if the legends were true, it wasn’t even awakened, which meant it was no different than any sword found in a sheath of the lowest-ranking soldiers!

But Kunshu? Kunshu was the Emperor’s sword! Forged by a Clan Thunder! Sculpted under the guidance of a powerful spirit! Awake and aware, containing a hidden power! Power was always better, and—

“Sotorii!” His father’s voice shattered through his thoughts. “Did you hear what I just said?” His heart missed a beat. “You...um...”

The Emperor closed his eyes and deflated. “Never mind,” he mumbled, his mouth neither smiling nor frowning.

Sotorii lowered his gaze. Again, he disappointed his father. As he had so many times of late. He would never live up to his father’s expectations, nor that of the Hantei name.

But he wanted to! He was trying! Wasn’t that why he tried to lead the court, to correct them, to set an example? Wasn’t that why he’d swallowed his fears and challenged the Ruby Champion herself? Why he’d stood up to his bully of a brother? He had to make his father proud! Somehow!

A long sigh escaped the Hantei’s lips. “I wasn’t going to tell you this, Sotorii. Not so soon. But all things considered, perhaps you’d best hear this from me.”

There was something about his tone, and the way he avoided looking at his son, that made Sotorii’s extremities go cold.

“I am abdicating.”

He’d spoken so abruptly, Sotorii had to repeat the word to himself. Abdicating? He was... leaving? Retiring?

“I have made up my mind,” he continued. “Tomorrow, I will shave my head, join the Brotherhood, and contemplate the lessons of my life.”

A dozen thoughts fought for Sotorii’s attention, clattering around his skull. What did this mean? Had this been done before? Why was he saying it like this, with that tone, and without looking at him? *Father please, just look at me for a moment!*

“But father, what would happen to...”

“The throne?” The Emperor cast him a sad look. “I had meant to leave it for you, Sotorii. But you are not ready. It would destroy you.”

His blood turned thick. "Father, I *am* ready!"

"You know better than that." The Hantei folded his arms. "That is why I have decided that you are coming with me."

Sotorii blinked. Coming with him?

"We leave tomorrow for the Monastery Among the Winds." He paused. "It will not be easy, Sotorii. You will not have servants or comforts. But the hardship will make you stronger. In a few years, it will forge you into a leader."

That...didn't sound so bad, in truth. An adventure with his father. He'd traveled before, seen many courts, seen the lands of the other clans. But this was different, wasn't it? A new feeling, one of purpose, made him feel lighter. "I won't fail you."

"It is not for me," the Hantei replied. "It is for your brother."

Daisetsu?

The Emperor rose with difficulty. "Daisetsu needs you, Sotorii. He will need advisors he can trust. The entire Empire will be looking to him..."

There was a knot in Sotorii's throat, twisting, growing with a possibility—a nightmare—that had just occurred to him. "Father," he whispered, "what have you done?"

"It's already decided," the Hantei said. "The Emerald Champion wrote the edict today. What did you think I meant when I said you are not ready, Sotorii?"

His heart stopped. *You're giving the throne to...?*

His breath quickened, angry fire spreading through his arms, bleaching his vision.

Daisetsu.

His father was speaking. Something about family. Something about courage. He couldn't hear. Not clearly.

But you can't.

"...more to being a leader than just..."

It's not fair.

"...but he will look to you for..."

I was first.

"...he needs you more than..."

Father, you...

He rose. He grasped Kunshu by the handle. Pulled it free.

You are the one unfit to rule!

Sotorii heard only his own gasps. How had he gotten here, at the center of the room? Kunshu, unsheathed in his hands, was dripping on the tatami. There was red spattered everywhere: across the floor, across the velvet cushions and the broken table, mere inches from the Lion Clan sword. Coating Kunshu's blade. And his father, lying face down among the destruction.

No.

No!

The sword dropped from his limp fingers, clattering upon the mats. He fell to his father's side, heart racing. He couldn't feel a heartbeat. Just wetness.

His hands were so bloody.

You killed him.

Breathe. It can be fixed, undone—he can be healed. It is not as bad as it looks. It cannot possibly be. Wasn't this chamber warded by the Seppun? Wouldn't they know if he died?

Sotorii gripped his knees. There wasn't enough air.

No. His father was dead, and he'd killed him. Now they would be coming. He should run.

Run now! Why aren't you running?

Warm tears streaked down his grimacing face. He hadn't meant it. Couldn't he take it back?

Someone else did it. *Yes. A servant! Not me. Not—*

The chamber door slid open.

A gasp. Bayushi Kachiko froze mid-step in the doorway. Beside her, the demon mask of Bayushi Aramoro couldn't conceal his shock. Kachiko's entourage of servants shrunk back in collective horror. One of them screamed.

I'm finished.

What was the point of resisting now? Sotorii slid into a defeated pile. As the servant screamed again, he surrendered to an odd and sudden calm. He deserved whatever came next.

The scream broke with a loud smack. The girl reeled from Kachiko, clutching her cheek.

"Aiko, please," said Kachiko, "you're making a scene."

She turned to Aramoro. "Close the door and secure the hallway. Allow none save the servants to pass. And when they have passed, make note of their names."

The door closed behind him.

Sotorii looked over his knees as Kachiko addressed her servants. "Tell no one what you have seen here." She worked a bauble free from her hair and pushed it into the hands of an owl-eyed servant girl. "Take this to the Scorpion Embassy. Tell the guard it is for Nightingale."

The others snuck glances at him. He pictured them whispering. Chuckling.

He buried his face. He felt as if the roof had collapsed upon him, and worse, he'd been the one to pull the beam.

Soft footsteps came to rest nearby. He felt Kachiko's presence, smelled her floral perfume.

"My prince?" Her voice was gentle, like a soft flute. She lowered her face to his, her deep brown eyes like a doe's. "What happened?"

"I killed him," he confessed. "I-I...lost my temper..."

"Why?"

There was no judgement or surprise in her tone, just idle curiosity. He almost laughed.

"He was going to abdicate. He was going to name Daisetsu his heir."



She sat back and looked to the paper screen shielding the window. Sotorii's eyes came to rest again on his father's body. Those gnarled and spotted hands had taught him to hold a brush. That face, buried in the floor, had beheld him at *Shichi-Go-San*. Sotorii's chest ached. He rocked back and forth. He only wanted his father to look at him again.

"Does anyone else know?"

About his father? No, she meant Daisetsu. "T-Toturi. He wrote the edict. Father said so."

That's right. Akodo Toturi had done this. "He must have talked father into it," he whispered, the heat returning. "Did you hear how he spoke to me? He and Daisetsu must have planned this together!"

She touched his hand. Kachiko's dark eyes twinkled beneath a brow pinched in concern. She leaned close. There was nowhere he could look without seeing her shoulders, her neck, her rivers of velvet hair. His face grew hot. She was like a blanket slowly enveloping him. Warm. Safe.

"It was no one's fault," she said. "Do not worry. I will help you with this burden." She rose like smoke. "I am sorry that you discovered him like this."

Discovered him? What was she talking about? She smiled, and there was something wrong with it, as though she were looking right through him.

He licked his dry lips. "Am I...? What are you going to...?"

Two walls slid aside, revealing passages frequented only by servants. A dozen people in servant's garb poured into the room.

The chamber doors parted. More flooded in. Noiseless. Swift. They pulled the tatami off the floor. They swept the broken table. They removed his father's robe. They measured him with a silk ribbon. They wiped the blood from Kunshu and fed it to its sheathe. Everything was stepping backwards. Reversing.

Kachiko spoke, filling his head, replacing his thoughts.

"I know this is hard for you, my prince. You adored your father. We all did. But this was inevitable. He was getting older. He knew the end was coming. He is with your ancestors, and now you must be strong. You must endure and carry on."

As the sword was replaced upon the stand, she cast him a reassuring smile. "After all, soon you will be Emperor."

Kachiko closed her fan with a flick of her wrist. The pin connecting the spokes was wearing out, but she unfurled it again anyway. Her favorite fan, with thin silk depicting two courtly women playing cat's cradle.

She closed it again. Opened it again. It helped her think.

Beyond the Hantei's pale body, servants—or men dressed that way—lifted a plank out of the floor, carrying it noiselessly into the servant-hall. The replacement was lowered into place and gently tapped down with a felt-covered mallet.

Cat's cradle was one of her favorite games. She once spent an afternoon teaching Doji Hotaru to play, the Crane girl's eyes glimmering as she wove the first string figure, pulling the yarn tight and transferring it, flawlessly, to the other girl's fingers. She remembered the delight on Hotaru's face when she pulled the string, changing the geometric pattern to another perfectly symmetrical figure. The object, she explained, was to avoid making a figure that couldn't be transformed again. Dancing Dragon could become Beads of Heaven or Winking Toad, but Winking Toad was a dead end, and not everyone knew how to make Beads of Heaven.

And of course, the game was over if you dropped the threads. But only beginners did that.

Hotaru had seemed to understand, but chose her figures on a whim. Kachiko always mapped out every move, building contingencies for choices, suggesting with her eyes.

Kachiko swept the room again. Kunshu, on the stand. The ancestral sword of the Lion, somehow untouched. The table, replaced. The Emperor's robes, replaced. The floor, in-progress. The prince, in his room memorizing what she'd told him to say.

So what was she missing?

Aramoro entered on urgent feet. "Miya Satoshi is asking for the Emperor," he said with a calm and clarity quite unlike him. "He will not be dissuaded."

Kachiko nodded, tucking the fan away. The question still pricked the back of her mind. The entire game was ultimately a matter of pulling the right string, but you could only pull a thread you knew was there. There was always another move if you planned it correctly. Always a string to pull.

The lord of the Miya family wore his impatience openly as he stormed in. "What is going on? It is well past—"

His eyes darted to the body, his color draining. He stared as Kachiko waited. "How long?" came his defeated voice.

"An hour, perhaps," she replied, adopting a tone of barely concealed sorrow. "I'm afraid it was Prince Sotorii who discovered him."

He nodded absently. "That explains the young prince's distress."

She gestured to where the "servants" worked. "I discovered them both when I would have



delivered my nightly report. We have already sent for the Seppun to consecrate the room, but I saw fit to begin preparations.”

“Commendable.” He knelt beside the body. “Pass on in peace, O Son of Heaven.”

Aramoro drew an ivory handle from the depths of his sleeve. An inch of sharpened steel glinted in the dim light. He looked from Satoshi to Kachiko and raised an eyebrow.

Casually, she tucked a stray hair behind her ear. *No.*

Aramoro sheathed the dagger.

“It is so sudden,” Satoshi murmured. “We thought he had more time.”

A pause. A sucked breath. Then, oh so slightly, Satoshi leaned in.

He knows.

To his credit, he gave very little away as stood up. Had she been younger and less experienced, had she not spent hours studying his expressions, she might have believed that he was still in the dark. His frown could have been mistaken for grief, and not determination.

Aramoro stepped, oh so slowly, into the doorway.

Kachiko adorned her softest smile. “Something troubles you, Miya-sama?”

“Only how bold the Emperor’s pets have grown.”

How like the Miya *daimyō*. No subtlety. So he thought the Scorpion killed the Emperor, did he?

His eyes flicked to Aramoro in the door. “Do as you like, Lady of Scorpions, but the truth will come out, even if I never leave this room.”

Sometimes, the right string to pull was obvious.

“My lord, do not let us keep you.” She gestured to the doorway.

Aramoro tensed. She knew he was calculating how swiftly he could cross with his knife. But he took her cue, stepping aside.

Satoshi thundered past.

“It is shame about Sotorii, however.”

He stopped, spinning. “Now you dare threaten the prince?”

“No, Miya-sama. You do. He is the one who killed his father.”

Never before had she seen a *daimyō*’s façade of self-control collapse so completely, the horror washing over carefully crafted features, like the shattering of porcelain. She watched him fight himself. “The prince’s behavior as of late... Yes. You’re telling the truth. That’s why the wards didn’t alarm the Hidden Guard...”

Now *that* was interesting. Kachiko had been informed of the Hidden Guard when she became Imperial Advisor. But she had not known about the wards. Was that what she was overlooking?

“Weren’t you going, Miya-sama?” she remarked.

Satoshi blinked.

“Go on,” she continued. “Tell the court what happened, that the prince killed his father.” She let the weight of her words fully sink in. “Cast that shadow over the next Emperor and



forever stain the Hantei name. Let the shame of the son destroy the memory of his father. Cast down a thousand years of reputation and sunder the Hantei, eroding Imperial clout, now, when tensions between the clans are at their highest! At least you will be remembered for your honesty.” Kachiko crossed her arms. “The Scorpion know our loyalties. Do you?”

Defiant Dog into Cowing Rat. Pull the string.

Satoshi’s horror faded into realization, calculation. “You are right,” he finally uttered. “The honor of the Hantei *must* be preserved.” He looked sorrowfully at the dead Emperor. “We can tell no one.

“Even so,” he continued, “the Seppun daimyō should be here now. As the one overseeing his body, and the funeral vigil...”

“Better he should be summoned by you personally,” Kachiko said, “so that you may properly convey the importance of maintaining the Emperor’s honor.” She met his eyes. “And that of his son.” Satoshi left.

Aramoro returned to Kachiko’s side. “He will tell no one. After all, the truth would shame the Imperial families as well, since they could not protect him.”

“Yes. He’s ours now.” She paused. “There is still one loose end I need you to handle, Aramoro.”

His eyes smiled above his mask. “Toturi.” The only one who knew the Emperor’s final edict. “Do it tonight.”

He was gone. She couldn’t remember the last time he’d seemed so happy to take a life.

Toturi would have been a useful pawn. But what is the purpose of pawns, if not to sacrifice?

“My lady.”

An unremarkable, middle-aged man bowed respectfully before her. He was the one who had replied to her summons; she would have mistaken him for just another servant, had he not introduced himself as “Bayushi No-name,” and had he not dared to meet her eyes upon entering.

“The varnish for the replacement planks will dry within the hour, and then we will lay the tatami.” He gestured to a thin woman sprinkling something from a bag. “We are dusting now.”

So that replaced fixtures would not look new. He knew his job well.

“As for the body, I repaired what I could. Applied make-up. The wound should not bleed through his garments, although, if the body is undressed, the damage will be apparent.”

So only the undertaker would notice. This could work. “The servants,” she said, the thought suddenly arising. “What of them?”

“Their silence has been assured.”

Another misfortune. “I rather liked Aiko,” she remarked. “She was bright, for a peasant girl.”

“Would you like her ashes?” No-name offered. “I can make arrangements.”

She nodded.

“There is one more thing. As I was stuffing and sewing the wound, I discovered this on His Excellency’s body.” He produced a bound hand-scroll and offered it.



It was heavy in her hand, the paper thick and textured. An official document? “What does it say?” she asked.

“I thought it impertinent to read, my lady. I would not have troubled you with it, but I have found that in this line of work, such discoveries should be swiftly surrendered.” He lowered his head. “Will there be anything else?”

“No,” she said, she favoring him with a smile. “You have done well here, No-name. You honor your *dōjō*.”

“My thanks.” He pulled a set of dirty robes from his satchel. They were from one of the servants. He donned them quickly, expertly. “Now, I leave the city, my lady. Nightingale will aid you, should you require more.” Disguise complete, he bowed low. “It has long been my aspiration to serve your esteemed family, Lady of Secrets. This was an honor.” With that, he went to the window.

“Where will you go?” Kachiko asked.

“I cannot say. A Bayushi died tonight in the pleasure quarter. Too much drink.”

“How will I find you, if I need your services again?”

“You won’t. Goodbye.”

The night swallowed him whole.

And she was alone.

Kachiko leaned against the wall and exhaled slowly. She felt as though she’d been running for hours. But it wasn’t over yet, was it? The next string figure would pass into her hands soon enough. The new Emerald Championship would be delayed until Sotorii took the throne, an Emperor indebted to the Scorpion. She would suggest that he simply appoint a new Emerald Champion, of course. He would even believe it was his own idea.

It was rare that one’s duty and one’s aspirations overlapped so perfectly. As her oaths demanded, she had protected the Hantei name. What’s more, she’d corrected his mistake. Until tonight, she had only ever regarded her nightly report to the Emperor as a chore of her station, more often awakening the elderly ruler from accidental slumber than informing him of something requiring his attention. But now, she thanked Bayushi’s spirit that this tedious chore had been hers. Had someone else been entrusted with it—had someone else stumbled into the room just then...

The scroll. She worked the silk wrap loose with her thumb. The mulberry paper uncurled, as if presenting itself. She lifted it to the light.

Broad strokes. Tear-shaped dots. It was unmistakably Toturi’s writing.

An edict from His August Imperial Majesty, Hantei XXXVIII...

His final edict! It must have been dictated to Toturi by the late Hantei himself. It was precisely as Sotorii had said. The late Hantei had named Daisetsu his heir. Yet, there was more. Quickly, her eyes drank the words, sprinting westward across the page.

...And as Daisetsu is not yet of age, he will ascend as Emperor under the guidance of a regent, the esteemed Champion of the Scorpion Clan.



Bayushi Shoju.

Shoju. Her husband. Imperial Regent? Instead of the Chancellor, Kakita Yoshi? Why had he...

Shoju knew.

A string figure, loose around her fingers, slipped.

Shoju knew Daisetsu was going to be named as the Imperial successor. Of course he did! That was why the Emperor had named him regent. They must have arranged it together. They were childhood friends, weren't they?

An image played out in her mind: the Imperial Court wrapped in the white cloth of mourning. The Miya daimyō reading an edict confirming Sotorii as heir. Shoju would know the edict was fake. He would know she was behind it. There was no sense hiding anything from the Master of Secrets.

Would he go along with it?

He had to, didn't he? To expose it would shame the Scorpion, shame his family, undo all they had accomplished! And it would shame her, his own wife, the Imperial Advisor, protector of the Hantei's reputation, the only one who...

But they would already think the Scorpion killed the Emperor, wouldn't they?

Racing, she followed the thread, each knot and tangle. If Shoju was regent, then all this would look *very* convenient. The disappearance of the Emerald Champion. The sudden loss of the Emperor. All to put Shoju on the throne. That's how it would look. Satoshi had concluded as such with less. And the truth could never be revealed, lest it shame the Hantei name. No, he couldn't be regent. It would spoil everything.

No. You have spoiled everything.

You dropped the threads.

Kachiko sat slowly on a corner cushion, taking slow breaths to calm her rapid pulse. Whatever her husband's plans, she had almost certainly ruined them.

But, she wasn't to blame. No one could have foreseen Sotorii's patricide. No one even knew the late Emperor had chosen a different heir, except for Toturi and Shoju. And now the dice were cast. The bet could not be changed. If only Shoju had told her, she could have acted differently! She could have still turned the events to favor the Scorpion!

So why didn't he?

Why didn't he tell his own wife that he was positioned to be Imperial Regent? For that matter, why not mention that Daisetsu would be named heir? Why was he keeping these things from her? Didn't he trust her? What had she done to lose his confidence?

She opened her fan. Closed it.

When had she drawn the fan again? The dim light passed through the Asahina-made silk and danced on polished spokes carved by Kakita artisans. If she held it close, she could smell cherry and plum, see a moonlit smile touch dancing gray eyes.

It had not always been Kachiko's fan, but it *had* always been her favorite.



Shoju knew about Hotaru. It was not as though she hid that from him. They had an agreement. He *understood*.

But did he think she would tell the Crane Champion his secrets?

Her heart held still. Did he think she had surrendered some already?

If so, why was she still alive?

She would have to tell him. Tonight. Now. Shoju needed to know what had transpired here. What she had set into motion.

She scooped up the edict as two men entered, carrying a square of straw *tatami* between them. The final piece would be set into place. There was no turning back now. She had committed the Scorpion to this course. It would displease him, but Shoju would see that she had no choice. He would understand.

She would have to make him.

