

The Cornered Lion

Part I

By Robert Denton III

It was after his third failed attempt to complete Harmony at a Balanced Edge that Toturi realized the kata was hindered by more than just his sluggishly healing injuries. He could not blame his imperfect footing on the unfamiliar balance of the practice sword, nor his protesting knee, which felt wooden and weak. The foundation of a Lion's strength was their pride. What had he to be proud of now, hiding in this dōjō in the wake of his failure?

"We fear that whoever sought to have you killed may have succeeded in a similar attempt against the Emperor."

Toturi's heart shuddered—a shameful pump. That it beat while his lord's was still was bad enough. That assassins scurried freely in the Imperial Capital—organized and strong enough to strike at both the Emperor and his sworn protector—was unthinkable. In the history of the office, had there been a more significant failure?

With each passing day, more distressing news dripped from Kāgi's lips while Toturi recovered in the shadows. Shōju sitting on the dead Emperor's throne. The rightful heir missing, presumed kidnapped by the Iuchi witch. The Dragon Clan army occupying the capital. Skirmishes breaking out in the outer districts of Ootosan Uchi, as if ruffians in hiding could sense the tension.

And the latest of Kyūden Kakita, how Matsu Tsuko had seized that Lion castle in Toturi's absence. By remaining hidden, letting them believe he was dead, was what unfolded there on his hands? If the Lion threw the Empire into war, would he ultimately be responsible?

It was as if the fragile seams holding the Empire together were now fraying. Tearing apart. What use was an Emerald Champion who could not hold them together?

Toturi gazed longingly at the tip of the practice blade. The edge may be dull, but the tip was sharp, like the fang of a cat. *You should fall on that*, he thought. It would be a slow death, and one he deserved. Even young students of the Lion Clan who failed their *gempuku* still had the courage to split their bellies rather than shame themselves with their failure. What excuse did he have, then, for a heart that still beat and lungs that dared to draw breath?



"You wish to make the three cuts then, do you?"

Toturi froze at his brother's voice. The memory was as unbidden as it was vibrant and real: his brother, Akodo Arasou, cross-armed and smiling. The vassals of a defeated Ikoma lord, whose death they could not prove to be at Daidoji hands, pressing their foreheads into the dirt, begging to follow him into the next world.

"What a terrible thing to outlive your lord," Arasou had said. "But I can think of something more shameful than that. And that is dying before having avenged him."

The blade clattered from Toturi's fingers. He could not help but smile. *Arasou-kun... You always were the best of us.*

Very well.

Toturi burst into a frenzy of strikes, chasing and tearing into invisible opponents, his bare feet raking into phantom knees and shins, his fists uncurling between strikes, like retracting claws. His shadow cast a feline shape against the wall, a hallmark of The Cornered Lion kata. How easily it came to him now!

As he tore an aggressive path through imagined opponents, a hundred threads unfolded before him—invisible pathways tangling and forking, a tapestry of possibilities. He chose a thread and followed it.

The first question: who had the most to gain from the Emperor's death? The answer was obvious. Shoji was regent, after all. The Emperor's decree, penned by Toturi himself, made the Master of Secrets the most powerful man in Rokugan. Shoji had known about the decree, hadn't he? It only followed that he had the most to gain by the Hantei's death.

But then, Shoji would have also known that the Emperor intended to abdicate. All Shoji had to do was wait a few days, and he would be regent anyway. So why kill him? He'd already won. Why risk everything just to be regent a few days sooner? That wasn't the man Toturi remembered from their sparring match years ago, a man who was still and watching for openings, a man who waited. Shoji was many things, but impatient wasn't one of them.

It couldn't have been Shoji, then. Someone else had something to gain. But who?

The next thread: Daisetsu's disappearance. The courts blamed the Iuchi witch, and it was true they'd vanished together, were even seen together by Daisetsu's yōjimbō. The young Seppun had vanished since giving his testimony, leaving his topknot behind. But the timing was too convenient. After all, if the heir could not be found, wouldn't that prolong Shoji's time on the throne? For that matter, if he never returned, would Shoji ever abdicate?

Toturi considered a convergence of threads. What if Daisetsu was kidnapped by the same forces that made the attempt on his life and killed the Emperor? It was true that the Unicorn had no love for the Imperial Court. For that matter, Toturi's death would have aided their war against the Lion. But would they dare attempt such a thing? It wasn't like them. Was Shahai complicit in it? Or had she perhaps played another role, one the court had not considered: that of a savior? She was fond of Daisetsu, after all. It was no secret to those who paid attention.

In either case, the heir was in grave danger. Whoever had killed the Emperor would surely come after him. And if Toturi was discovered alive, they would come after him as well.

Was there another who Toturi and Daisetsu shared as an enemy? No sooner had he asked himself than a name surfaced, draining the color from his face and pausing his kata. But then, his last interaction with Sotorii had not been pleasant, had it? And if he knew about the edict, he would become angry—an anger that was well known to the court.

But angry enough to kill his own father? And if so, why leave the edict intact? Why not destroy it and claim the throne himself?

No, it could not be Sotorii. The conclusion brought him great relief, and he was briefly ashamed for having considered it.

The next string, then. And the next. The world became a blur of imagined threads and raking strikes, of possibilities and instinctive movements. At their center was Shojū, again and again. He was connected to this. But how?

The kata ended in an abrupt strike. Toturi held the pose Lion Faces the Heavens. He had no answers for the questions that plagued him, but perhaps he did not require any. His course was clear.

He could not allow an assassination attempt on the Emerald Champion to go unanswered. To do this would announce that anyone could attack the office of Emerald Champion without fear of retribution. For the integrity of the office, he had to root out these killers and drag them into the light. And perhaps, in so doing, he might discover what really happened to the Emperor.

He would start with Shojū. He would march into the court and demand answers.

And if Shojū really was behind the attempt? If Shojū had killed the Emperor?

Well, at least Toturi would go to Meido knowing the truth and with honor satisfied.

Toturi crossed the dōjō on certain feet, new energy coursing through his veins. It was risky, announcing to the court that he was still alive. For all he knew, his assassin might be among those in the court. And he could not count on the Lion's protection, now that Tsuko commanded them. He could always assert his position, seize the clan back from her, but to do this would shame the samurai who followed her with treason. The Lion could not afford a mass seppuku while at war against two clans. Better to let her lead for now. Even if it was a risk, he had to accept it.

Filled with new purpose, Toturi slid the door aside.

Akodo Kaede stood in his path.

She knew. It was obvious from the look on her face. Somehow, just from one look, she knew everything he intended to do.

"I won't let you," she said.

"I should hide here forever, then?"

She winced.



He pressed. "I cannot allow the world to think a strike against the Emperor will go unavenged. Failure is why there is no longer a Jade Champion. I cannot allow the office of Emerald Champion to suffer the same fate. I cannot allow these assassins to roam free. What if they go after the Imperial Heirs next? Will I be remembered as the Emerald Champion who stood aside?" He turned away. "If so, how could I ever show my face to you again?"



Kaede fixated on an unseen horizon. "The injured lion, striking wildly at anything that moves, is a deadly opponent. But so focused on the enemies before him, he does not see the spear hovering behind."

He hesitated.

"You seek meaning in death, Toturi-kun. Show yourself now, and the assassins will strike again. I won't be there to stop them this time. That is a death that means nothing."

An overwhelming urge came from Toturi's belly, to refute her, to push past her, to rush headfirst into the court and roar to shake the foundations, like Akodo, like a Lion. *Let them come*, he thought. *Let them all try!*

Instead, Toturi sat at her feet. "Then what should I do? I cannot ignore my oaths, nor can I hide while the Empire crumbles. I am lost, Kaede. I am torn in two."

She knelt beside him. Her forehead felt warm against his, as warm as her breath on his cheek. "Your oaths are mine, Toturi-kun. You won't face this alone. We must find your path, our path, together."

He nodded. He trusted her. "What would you have us do?"

When she told him, it was like finding a candle after a lifetime in the dark.



