

# A Crane Takes Flight

By D.G. Laderoute

Desperation hangs about a defeated army like a pall of smoke.

Doji Hotaru could feel it, as thick and acrid as the actual smoke fouling the air of the Crane Clan war encampment, billowing from myriad cooking, forge, and watch fires. She'd spent hours, now, pushing her way through it, her retinue of guards and staff officers in tow. Hours spent stopping to speak with sullen squads of soldiers staring into those same fires, their faces hard and distant as they each relived their own, small part in the day's defeat to the Lion. Each time, she'd tried to be a fresh wind of inspiration, dispersing that pall of despair. She'd spoken to the Crane soldiers of the pride of their ancestors, of their value to the clan, of defeat being just a temporary thing, a crucible purifying the army and making it stronger, all of it punctuated by appropriate quotes from the *Book of Sun Tao*. And each time, as she'd left them, the soldiers had seemed at least a little brighter, the haze of despair around them dispelled somewhat.

*I was that cleansing wind...*

*Wasn't I?*

Hotaru and her entourage approached the next group of soldiers, one of the last. One of the last, that is, if she didn't count the squads of dour and somewhat squalid warriors clustered in the distance, around a group of fires set apart from the main encampment. And she didn't count them. They made up a war band of rōnin, one of several hired into the Crane army as mercenaries.

Hotaru barely offered them a glance. *Honorless dogs...and no doubt bandits, when they aren't being paid to fight. They need no inspiration, beyond Crane gold...*

Crane gold. There was less of it every day. Certainly not enough to spare for brutish mercenaries. But the Crane Clan army, small among the Great Clans to begin with, had suffered such loss during their battles around Toshi Ranbo that hiring mercenaries had been the only solution. And that required gold.

The sculpture, titled *A Crane Takes Flight*, was boxed up for delivery to the waiting merchants of the Daidoji Trading Council. For as long as she could remember, the piece had been displayed in the same place in Kyūden Doji, in a corner where a corridor turned. Someone—she couldn't recall who—had told her it had been carved by one of the Crane's most masterful sculptors at about the time the Unicorn Clan returned to Rokugan—so, three hundred years ago.

And now it was gone, sold by her decree, to pay for mercenaries...

But regret was a sin. What mattered was her clan. Her people and subjects couldn't eat art,



but if selling it would help the Crane hold the fertile Osari Plains, she would sell every last masterpiece if she had to.

*And what would Satsume say about that?*

Hotaru quickened her pace, bypassing the rōnin silhouetted against their bonfire and heading toward her command post. Along the way, she and her staff passed by a medical tent ringed with fallen soldiers on litters. The chant of a lone *shugenja* rose from within, but the prayers were not enough to drown out the moans rising from many of the litters. Still, was the sound of suffering a blessing itself, when the alternative was eternal silence?

She couldn't know.

The grass around the tent entrance had been beaten flat and muddy. How much of the muck was water, and how much was blood? She could stop, talk to the wounded—

*Regret is a sin...*

—and just carried on.

The cleansing wind was spent, and she still had much to do.

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Hotaru's retinue dispersed as she approached her command post, a cluster of tents on a high piece of ground near the center of the encampment. Entering her command tent alone, she stopped. A man was already there, waiting for her. Daidoji Netsu: the general who had lost the field for the Crane today.

Hotaru shrugged off the *haori* jacket she'd worn against the night's chill and gave her eyes a moment to adjust to the glow of the lanterns—soft and wan, but still sharply bright compared to the darkness outside. Daidoji Netsu knelt facing her, his back to the map table depicting the disposition of Crane and Lion troops around Toshi Ranbo. When their eyes finally met, Netsu bowed forward, placing his forehead to the cedar planks of the tent's floor.

"Rise, Netsu-san," Hotaru said, "and tell me what went so very wrong today."

Netsu straightened, but he remained kneeling. He wore no armor, just a kimono of blue and grey, and had placed his *daishō* on the floor to his left, ready to be drawn in defense of his lord. Hotaru noted a folded piece of plain paper beneath the *wakizashi*.

"I committed the reserve too soon, Doji-ue," Netsu said. "As a result, when the Lion flanking force revealed itself and our right began to fail, I had nothing with which to reinforce it."

Hotaru stared at the map table. Its portrayal of the broader strategic situation around Toshi Ranbo made the lost battle—depicted by only a few of the many wooden tokens representing the Lion and Crane troop dispositions—seem a small thing. However, by winning the day, the Lion had forced the Crane to withdraw from a village known as Three Trees. The Lion would have no doubt seized and fortified the village by now, cutting off another of the roads into Toshi Ranbo. That left the Crane in a precarious position, with only a single road, leading from the palace of their Tsume vassal family, Kyūden Kyotei in the Kintani Valley, by which to supply





their garrison still holding Toshi Ranbo.

Her gaze still on the map table, Hotaru asked, “Why did you commit the reserve when you did, Daidoji-san?”

“I perceived a weakness in the Lion’s center,” Netsu said, “and sought to exploit it.” Hotaru heard the Daidoji shift behind her. “I failed. And that failure is why I have prepared this, Doji-ue.”

She turned to find Netsu holding the paper that had been placed beneath his wakizashi.

“It is my death poem, my lady.

I will, of course, perform the three cuts to atone for my failure today.”

Hotaru accepted the paper but didn’t unfold it. Instead, she turned back to the map table and just let her gaze wander across it. Netsu remained kneeling, waiting for her acceptance of his offer to commit seppuku.

A long moment passed, filled only by the distant, restless sounds of an army encamped.

*Crane heritage—spent to finance the clan’s survival.*

*Haven’t we spent enough?*

Hotaru placed the death poem, still folded, on the place marking Three Trees on the map table.

*Regret is a sin.*

“No,” she said, turning back to Netsu. “I will not allow you to perform the three cuts.” Netsu’s face started to tighten in shock, but Hotaru raised her hand. “It is not because I would deny you the restoration of your honor, Netsu-san. Quite the opposite, in fact. I would have you restore your honor by leading our army to victory in its next battle.”

“My lady—”

“You committed the reserve because you saw a chance to break the Lion’s line, correct?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“So you sought an opportunity to win the day. As a result, you were unable to prevent us from *losing* the day, yes?”

“I...suppose that is true, Doji-ue.”

“And did not Akodo-no-Kami say, in his great work *Leadership*, that ‘to defend is to merely be hopeful, but to attack is to be victorious’?”



"He did, my lady."

"I would rather have a general commanding our army who aggressively seeks to win, Daidoji-san, than one who fights to simply not lose."

"I understand, Doji-ue. But that does not change the fact that I failed you, failed our clan—"

"A failure that I expect you will remember, and not repeat, Daidoji-san."

Netsu looked up at Hotaru for a moment, then bowed. "I am unworthy of the trust you place in me, my lady. I shall endeavor to earn it."

"Of that, I have no doubt." She looked at the map table, at the paper placed on Three Trees. "In the meantime, I shall leave your death poem where it is. I shall return it to you after your victory in our next battle against the Lion."

*And if you are defeated again, I shall read your poem, and you will perform the three cuts, Daidoji-san.* They were words she did not say, because it was unnecessary. Both knew that Netsu's seppuku had been stayed—not prevented altogether.

The Daidoji opened his mouth to say something else, but a sudden commotion outside cut him off. Voices rose—a sudden exclamation—then a heavily cloaked figure pushed into the tent. Netsu immediately reached for his katana, but he stopped when the figure pushed back their hood.

Hotaru...simply stared.

The man standing in the entrance gave a thin smile.

"Greetings, sister," Doji Kuwanan said. "I see that you were not expecting me."

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"Kuwanan," Hotaru smiled broadly after dismissing Netsu. "...you are alive!"

Kuwanan sniffed. "Unless you believe me to be a *shiryō* come to haunt you, then so it would seem, sister."

Hotaru's smile slipped a fraction at the hard edge to her brother's words. *Ghosts...* Did Satsume haunt her now, sabotaging her efforts to lead the clan through these trying times?

*Foolish*, she chided herself. *He's dead and gone.*

"All that we knew," she managed instead, "is that you had been reported missing after a skirmish at Shirei Mura. No body was found, but with no other leads to go on, we had to assume the worst."

"I was taken captive by a band of rōnin. Fortunately, I was able to escape them. I made my way to Kyūden Kakita, where I learned that you were here."

Hotaru looked at the map table. *Taken captive by a band of rōnin. Not unlike the ones now deployed with the Crane army. Could they be...?*

She dispelled the thought and looked back at Kuwanan. "Well, I thank the Fortunes for your return, my brother. It is so good to see you again."

Kuwanan slipped off his straw traveling cloak, draped it across a camp stool, then warmed





his hands over a brazier filled with glowing embers. As he did, his own gaze roamed across the map table.

“Our situation does not look promising,” he said at last, then frowned at the folded paper placed over Three Trees on the map. “What is that?”

“Daidoji Netsu-san’s death poem,” Hotaru explained. “He offered to perform the three cuts, to atone for our defeat by the Lion today.”

“I see. And when will

this occur? It is only right to attend.”

“It will not occur. I did not accept his seppuku.”

Kuwanan shot Hotaru a keen glance. “Why not?”

“He is a skilled general and an asset to our clan. Accordingly, I charged him to claim victory in our next battle, as a better way to atone for defeat in this one.”

“But he was defeated *today*.”

“Yes, but—”

“But nothing!” Kuwanan snapped. “He led our army to defeat, leaving our strategic position...” He waved a hand at the map table. “Not just weak, but practically untenable. We have soldiers, subjects, even hostages weighing in the balance. Kakita Asami—” He stopped, recollected himself before continuing. “And despite the stakes, this is the man you would have lead our forces *again*?” Kuwanan glared at the death poem for a moment, then turned it on Hotaru. “You should have accepted—*expected*—the three cuts from him, sister. That is what Bushidō demands.”

Hotaru made herself not shrink from her brother’s hard stare. He had no idea what was demanded of her. “Bushidō demanded that he make the offer, brother. And he did. It is my choice as champion to accept it or not.”

Kuwanan glanced at the folded paper and nodded. “So it is.” He looked back at Hotaru. “It is simply unfortunate that you tend to make such...compromises.”

*What do you know of compromises, brother, when you have never truly been tested?*



A still moment passed, split only by the soft snap of an ember in the brazier. She could not let the insult stand. "Compromises?"

Kuwanan, his eyes still on the paper, gave a slow sigh. "Your choices make no sense to me, sister. You place a failed general in command of our army, when one more defeat likely means the loss of Toshi Ranbo itself." He turned and locked his gaze on hers. "And you do nothing about the death of our father."

"The Emerald Magistrates—"

"Are investigating, yes. So I was told at Kyūden Kakita. And what have they learned?"

"They had not yet made a report when I left Otosan Uchi."

"So nothing, then. Doji Satsume dies, weeks turn into months, yet there are no interrogations, no arrests, no charges brought against anyone!"

Hotaru clenched her fists at her side. "For there to be suspects, my brother, there must have been a murder. But the Emerald Magistrates have so far ruled the death to be of natural causes."

"So Satsume wasn't murdered, then?"

"Are you not listening? I said—"

"You are making no effort to discern the truth for yourself!" Kuwanan interrupted her, pacing across the tent. "You have an obligation to see justice done for him, our family, and our clan. To determine who killed our father, and seek vengeance against them." He stopped, paused, then added, "That is certainly what our honored father would have expected of you... And it's what he would have done in your place."

*You dare! You, who have never been through what I have had to endure...*

Hotaru found herself gritting her teeth again. Deliberately, she relaxed her jaw. "But it is not our father who is the one facing these decisions. I am."

Kuwanan wheeled back to her. "That is the only thing that is certain here. *You* are making these choices. They are *certainly* not the ones Father would have made."

*Because I am not him, and I have no wish to be.* But Kuwanan clearly would not understand. He had not come to accept her in his father's place. And maybe he never would.

Instead, she simply said, "All we know is that our father died, Kuwanan. The Fortunes may very well have decreed it was his time to return to the Karmic Wheel. The Emerald Magistrates—"

"Are not the Crane! They are not our family!" Kuwanan stepped closer to Hotaru, his expression still hard, but underlain by one of pleading. "Do you not see, sister? Honor demands that we...that *you* learn the truth behind his death, whatever it is. And if he was murdered, then you must exact justice for his death."

Hotaru looked at the map table, but she didn't want to see its dire message, so she turned to the brazier instead.

*It is all so simple for you, because you would not be champion of our clan. Father did not expect of you what he expected of me. You never failed him, because your successes didn't matter.*



*How can you not see that?*

Her silence left Kuwanan scowling. “Perhaps you simply don’t want to investigate Satsume’s death, Hotaru. Perhaps you just don’t care about the truth...or simply don’t want to know it.”

Hotaru’s fists tightened along with her jaw this time. She spun back to her brother’s hot gaze, fingernails digging into her palms. “How can you even say such a thing?”

“It is because, sister, I don’t think you are particularly sorry about Satsume’s death. You still blame him for our mother’s suicide—”

“If I do,” Hotaru snapped, “it is because he drove her to it. But even if that’s true, how *dare* you suggest that I would let that cloud my judgment or shirk my duty because of it!”

“And yet, you still do nothing.”

Hotaru took a deep breath...and let it out. This conversation was spiraling toward places from which it might not be able to return. She made her voice become calm. “The Emerald Magistrates have, as you’ve acknowledged, been investigating this matter for weeks. They have found nothing to suggest Satsume was murdered. Do you believe they are lying, or are they simply incompetent?”

“What I believe,” Kuwanan shot back, “is that you are content to leave the whole affair in the hands of others, their honesty or competence notwithstanding.” He paused, pursing his lips, his gaze still on his sister. Finally, he said, “The Scorpion have had much to gain with our father’s passing. I’ve heard that Bayushi Aramoro was a final contender for the Emerald Championship. It may have been Akodo Toturi who ultimately won the office, but that does not change the fact that our clan’s loss cannot help but be the Scorpion’s gain—Bayushi *Kachiko’s* gain.”

Hotaru moved to the map table; the war board had fallen from view. For Kuwanan to even hint that Kachiko had somehow been involved in Satsume’s death was so reprehensible she wanted to *strike* him—

“...some suggest that his death was neither natural nor accidental...” So Shizue had said shortly after Hotaru had arrived in the Imperial Capital, “...and that now the Emerald Championship is available for those who might covet it.”

Hotaru had gone on to consider how Shosuro Hametsu, Kachiko’s brother, was a master of poisons. And then there had been her own words, back to Shizue that day:

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

Kuwanan stepped up beside her. “Sister—listen to me. I believe that we—you, me, and many others—are being manipulated. Someone considers us little more than puppets, to be moved about according to their conniving whims.” He leaned closer to Hotaru. “Satsume’s death...my capture by rōnin...the Emerald Championship...all of it is theater, performed to the brush and ink of some unseen playwright. That playwright might be the Imperial Advisor.” He held up a hand as she opened her mouth. “And it might not. But we must know for certain. And I am not the only one who believes this possible.”



Hotaru looked at her brother. The sudden flare of indignant anger had faded, but she still wanted him to just...be quiet.

"What is your proof of this?" she asked.

"Proof?" Kuwanan shrugged. "At the moment, I have none. But that doesn't mean it doesn't exist, or that such manipulation isn't real."

"Anything can be true, if it's sufficient to simply say it is."

"I said I have no proof *at the moment*, sister. I simply need to find it." He leaned closer again. "Let me do that, Hotaru. Let me find the proof. Let me unravel this conspiracy and bring its perpetrators to justice."

Hotaru looked once more at the map table. She had grown up with *A Crane Takes Flight*, always in its same place, a solid, constant presence. She almost broke the sculpture once, while she and Kuwanan, just children, had chased each other along the corridor. She had tripped and struck the sculpture and it had teetered toward destruction, but Kuwanan had saved it, leaving them staring wide-eyed at each other over the near disaster.

And now it was gone, that obscure corner in the palace empty.

The map table blurred. Hotaru blinked until its bleak depiction of Crane fortunes was clear again.

*Regret is a sin.*

Daidoji Netsu's death poem drew her eyes. She had refused his seppuku because the Crane needed him. The clan had spent enough of its dwindling wealth...enough of its heritage and heirlooms...enough of its lives. It could afford no more.

Just as she had to Netsu, she turned to Kuwanan and said, "No. You are needed here, Kuwanan. I need you to help stabilize our strategic situation and then begin working toward a counteroffensive to consolidate and secure our hold on Toshi Ranbo."

Kuwanan just stared at his sister for a moment. Just as when they were children, Hotaru could see his gaze hardening with a stubborn defiance. If he'd been held to the same standards as she had, Satsume would have ensured that defiance remained a thing of the boy, no longer a part of the man. But he hadn't, so...

Kuwanan shook his head.

*No...please, Kuwanan-kun, do not do this...*

"You want me to do things that are merely necessary, sister." He picked up his straw cloak and pulled it over his shoulders. "But I must do what is *right*. I'm sorry you cannot see that."

She could stop him. Place him under guard. But she didn't. She knew her brother's flares of temper well. They were like the rain squalls that often swept across *Kyūden Doji* from the ocean—intense, but brief. He might balk at her commands, but in the end, Doji Kuwanan was driven by duty, just as she was.

Kuwanan disappeared behind the flap of the tent into the night.

*Let him uncover the truth he so craves. I know it was not Kachiko.*



*Kachiko had chosen Hotaru over her clan once before. She would not have killed Hotaru's father—unless she thought it was what Hotaru wanted.*

*Was it? Was she happy now?*

*No, impossible. I must be exhausted to even entertain such a notion.*

No, now there was only greater pressure for her to produce an heir with Kuzunobu. Her clan's alliance with the Fox Clan, which might yet hold the secrets to restoring elemental harmony to their lands, depended on it.

But what would succession matter if there was nothing to pass down? She would not leave a clan in shambles to her child as Satsume had.

*Our sacrifices will not have been in vain.*

Distantly, thunder rolled across the plains.

*And I will not regret.*

