

A Night Storm Rages

By D.G. Laderoute

“Father,” Doji Kuwanan said, “I have failed.”

But if the ghost of Doji Satsume heard, he made no answer. Or if he did, Kuwanan couldn't hear it over the turmoil wracking his own spirit.

He sighed, opened his eyes, and looked around the tent Daidoji Uji had offered him as a place to rest while he recovered. The Asahina healers had said the last of the pain from the wound inflicted by Mirumoto Hitomi should be gone before the setting of Lady Sun. By then, the elemental kami would have finished knitting together his injured flesh.

That injury wasn't the problem, though. The one that was could not be soothed, or bandaged, or treated by the healers. That wound had been to his honor, his pride, and his sense of self-worth. He'd borne it since his disastrously failed attempt to rescue the crown prince, Hantei Sotorii, from an enforced exile by the treacherous Scorpion pretenders now holding the Chrysanthemum Throne. A contingent of Seppun guards, along with a cadre of Dragon Clan samurai led by Hitomi, had been escorting the prince to the Monastery among the Winds. It was a conveniently obscure place where Sotorii could be kept, until he inevitably died of some mysterious accident or illness. Kuwanan had been determined to rescue Sotorii and restore him to his rightful place on the Imperial Throne.

He had almost succeeded.

Satsume did speak, but in Kuwanan's memories. *Almost succeeded*, his father had once said, *is just another way of describing failure*. He had been talking to his sister, Hotaru, but Kuwanan had taken the words to heart.

He sighed again, and let his mind follow Satsume's path of bitter truth to its bleak destination, one he had visited many times now. His failure had made ripples, like a stone dropped in water, that could wash over his family, his clan, even the Empire itself. Satsume would have gone on to say something like *...and failure is a stain, one you are obligated to cleanse—*

The tent rustled and Daidoji Uji entered. He bowed to Kuwanan, but stiffly, as the Daidoji *daimyō* was clad in full armor. Only his *mempō*, a distinctive mask of blank steel that covered his lower face, had not been fastened in place.

“Doji-sama,” Uji said, “as we make our final preparations for our assault on Kyūden Kakita, I must ask—do you intend to participate?”

In other words, Uji wanted to know, are you going to make yourself useful, or just keep loitering about my army? It was a fair question. Kuwanan was the brother of the Crane Clan



Champion, not someone Uji could just expect to press into service.

“My intent...” Kuwanan began, but he stopped, his voice trailing off. He didn’t actually know the answer. As a warrior, he most certainly should contribute to his clan’s effort to retake Kakita Palace from the Lion Clan. But he could not forget those ripples of failure that could wash over his family, his clan, even the Empire itself. If he joined the line of battle, did he risk causing the first of those ripples to wash over Uji and this army?



But his tortured musings had gone even further. He’d begun to wonder if the Heavens themselves objected to his intent to contest his sister’s leadership of the Crane, and if his failure was their way of demonstrating that. Could he only avoid tragedy by renouncing his intent to take the clan’s leadership from Hotaru? Would even that be enough, though? Would the only way to truly still those rippling waters be to perform the three cuts?

Even as these desolate thoughts trudged through Kuwanan’s mind, he remembered Hotaru’s letter, found among his father’s possessions in Ootosan Uchi. In it, Hotaru had written of her hatred for their father, and of her twisted love for Bayushi Kachiko. Her words seemed burned into his mind, like calligraphy rendered in fire, even now making his hands clench into fists. How could he not seek to supplant her, given how badly she’d compromised herself and her clan?

As he had been doing for days now, Kuwanan teetered on a katana’s edge between surrendering to his failure and pressing on regardless of it. What made the blade’s edge even keener was that he could see his father judging either choice as the correct one, or the wrong one. Perhaps that explained Satsume’s silence: his spirit was waiting for his son to make a decision that no one else could.

Kuwanan simply did not know which way to step from the razor-sharp dilemma, and end the pain of his uncertainty.

Uji shifted, his armor creaking in a silence quickly becoming awkward. “I will leave you to consider the matter, Doji-sama, as I must oversee the final preparations—”

“No,” Kuwanan said, raising a hand. That creak of armor. It was a sound he knew well. A martial sound, heralding coming strife and bloodshed, struggle and death. A sound that said, *I am about to place my life in the hands of the Fortunes, of the Heavens, to preserve or spend as they see fit.*



The Heavens. He had wondered about their judgment. Perhaps that was the answer. Allow the Heavens, the ultimate arbiters of what was right, to decide.

“Tell me, Uji-san,” Kuwanan went on, now letting instinct guide his words, “what will be the most difficult and dangerous part of this coming assault?”

Uji’s eyes narrowed, but he simply said, “The Lion have constructed a wooden stockade that stands apart from the keep. Its archers menace any approach to the palace gates, while archers in the palace threaten, in turn, any attack on the strongpoint. It is a cunning defensive work.”

“It is essential, then, that this strongpoint be taken.”

“Essential?” Uji frowned. “No. It would be beneficial, though, to at least neutralize it, to facilitate an assault upon the palace gates. I had considered a spoiling attack upon it, in conjunction with the main assault. On reflection, however, I believe it is a better option to focus our efforts elsewhere—”

“The weakest part of a palace is its gates, so your main assault should be there,” Kuwanan said. “Plan your spoiling attack on this strongpoint, Daidoji-san. I will lead it.”

“With all due respect, Doji-sama, such an attack is fraught with extreme risk. Casualties are likely to be severe.”

“I understand that.”

Uji’s frown deepened. “I am mindful of your training among the Lion, near the time of your coming of age. When their samurai perceive themselves to have failed, they will sometimes seek bloody redemption as Deathseekers.” He said nothing else, but his concern over Kuwanan’s motives was clear.

But Kuwanan shook his head, and even managed a thin smile. “Rest assured, Uji-san, I do not seek spectacular death in battle. I would not risk Crane lives in such a self-centered way.” The smile faded. “But...yes, I am giving the Heavens an opportunity to render their judgment upon me. I will fight to win. But if I do not survive, then their decision regarding the championship of our clan will be clear, will it not?”

He could see the Daidoji weighing the sincerity of his words, and simply waited. Finally, Uji nodded. “Very well. Then allow me to ask you this, Doji-sama. In his treatise *Leadership*, Akodo-no-Kami wrote, “In battle, all things are honorable.” Do you accept that as true?”

Kuwanan frowned at the unexpected question. “I admit to...misgivings...about that particular passage, but I am reluctant to question the wisdom of a Kami. Why?”

“Because,” Uji said, “while we cannot reduce the risks associated with attacking the Lion strongpoint, we have certain...assets...that will increase our chances of success.”

Kuwanan peered through the wet scrub and grass, into the pre-dawn gloom beyond. He could just make out the Lion strongpoint protecting the gates of Kakita Palace—a rough palisade of cedar logs cut from a nearby copse. It should have been brightly lit by torches. However, the rain, which had begun shortly after his small force of Crane warriors had started their circuitous approach, had forced the defenders to use only hooded lanterns. These wan lights now flickered erratically, moving back and forth, as the Lion defenders paced along the top of the wooden walls.

He turned to the woman beside him and whispered, “Are you ready, Daidoji-san?”

In answer, she made a hand signal, which brought a dozen more Harriers forward, their blackened *tekagi shuko*—tiger claws, wicked metal climbing implements—already affixed to their hands and feet. A few whispered words, then she quickly donned tiger claws of her own, turned back to Kuwanan, and nodded.

“We are ready, Doji-sama.”

Harriers. Kuwanan had heard of them, of course, assuming them to be nothing more than elite scouts. And they were that, but—as Uji had revealed to him—they were also much more. The Harriers employed stealth, deception, and specialized tactics to harass, disrupt, and confuse the enemies of the Crane, achieving effects far out of proportion to their numbers. They also uncomfortably reminded Kuwanan of *shinobi*: covert spies, saboteurs, and assassins. Unsurprisingly, the Scorpion, honorless dogs that they were, particularly favored the use of shinobi. Uji had assured Kuwanan, though, that the Harriers were strictly employed only in battle and, as Akodo-no-Kami had written, “In battle, all things are honorable.”

Besides, the Harriers were not a new invention, so presumably, as Crane Clan Champion, Satsume had known all about them. If he had approved of their tactics, who was Kuwanan to say otherwise?

Kuwanan nodded, and the Harriers, crouching low, slipped over the crestline and began their stealthy approach to the strongpoint. A squad of Daidoji archers followed them, to give cover as they sought to climb and breach the palisade. Their cloaks, dappled in dark blues and greys, caused all of them to be immediately swallowed by the predawn gloom in a way Kuwanan found utterly uncanny.

He turned back to the rest of his small force, thirty Daidoji Iron Warriors, and gestured to the sergeant leading them. The *gunsō* nodded back, and they all started forward, breaking the crestline and rushing toward the strongpoint’s gate of rough wood. If all went according to plan, they should arrive at the gate just as the Harriers opened it. If not, Kuwanan and the Daidoji would be caught beneath the palisade, in the open, with no choice but to try to storm the gate or withdraw.



A shout. Another. Kuwanan saw the dark shapes of the Harriers scampering up the palisade, climbing as quickly as monkeys. As they clambered over the top of the wall and vanished inside the strongpoint, more shouts rose.

Kuwanan swept his katana, Omeka, from its sheath and began to jog. His feet, and those of the Daidoji behind him, splashed through the rain-sodden grass and mud. Bowstrings snapped from ahead as Lion archers opened fire. Daidoji arrows whistled and hummed in response. Cries, as the missiles found targets on both sides. He reached the gate and crouched, gripping Omeka. Battle raged immediately on the other side of the rough cedar wall, literally within arm's reach, but it might as well have been happening on the Islands of Spice and Silk—

A thump, a loud scrape from rope hinges, and the gate opened a handspan.

Kuwanan slammed his shoulder against it. Iron Warriors joined him, widening the gap. Kuwanan shoved through, pushing someone aside—the commander of the Harriers; a deep cut across her face had taken an eye—and kept going. He cut down a Lion bushi who pushed desperately at the gate, trying to close it again. Then, Iron Warriors at his heels, Kuwanan flung himself into the melee.

Darkness. Rain. Fleeting glimpses of warriors, Lion and Crane. Figures striking, dodging, bleeding, falling. Kuwanan blocked a strike from an Akodo bushi, pushed inside it, kicked out the woman's knee, and opened her throat with Omeka.

Then, a dazzling flash, followed by a terrific blast of thunder. Rain crashed down in a torrent.

Kuwanan stopped, skidding in the mud, the battle swirling around him. Lightning. Thunder. Osano-wo, the mighty Fortune of Fire and Thunder, had come.

A sublime realization embraced Kuwanan. The Heavens had announced their presence. They had come to judge him.

He was unafraid. Indeed, a deep sense of peaceful inevitability enveloped him. In the next few moments, he would prevail, or he would die.

Kuwanan flung himself back into the battle, laying about him with his sword, kicking, punching, driving his way into the defenders. He stopped a strike from a Matsu with the flat of Omeka, then spun the sword in a quick spiral, disarming his opponent. The man tried to punch him, but Kuwanan slammed his sword's pommel into the Lion's face, then cut his neck spine-deep on the follow-through.



A spear jabbed at him, its point ploughing a furrow through his shoulder armor. Kuwanan used the momentum of his previous strike to spin a full circle, knocking the spear aside with his off hand, then cutting its wielder's leg out just above the knee. The man fell and Kuwanan stepped on his throat, crushing it, while seeking a new opponent.

The battle now became a series of stark vignettes, searing instants frozen by flashes of lightning—warriors striking, falling, bleeding, and dying. The fighting raged on—
—until it stopped.

Sucking in lungfuls of air that tasted of storm and mud and blood, Kuwanan, a dozen Iron Warriors flanking him, found himself facing four Lion bushi. They stood gasping, spattered with mud, swords raised, backs to the palisade. For a moment, the two sides simply glared across their blades through the hissing rain. Then lightning flashed again, and in its stark glare, Kuwanan realized he knew the Lion leader, a Matsu named Kaitokura. They had trained together during Kuwanan's time with the Lion, sparring under the harsh gaze of an Akodo sensei.

Kuwanan understood. The Crane had won, and he was still alive. But the Heavens were not done judging him. The aftermath of victory could be as important as the victory itself—perhaps more so.

He raised his hand, calling out, "Parley, Kaitokura-san!"

The Matsu glared for a moment, then recognition dawned, and he lowered his sword a fraction. "Kuwanan-sama...it seems we are destined to spar once again, but this time with steel."

Kuwanan shook his head, though. "No. That is unnecessary. We have won this day, yes, but you fought honorably and well. There is no need for further death."

Kaitokura's eyes narrowed. "You ask me to surrender, when I can yet wield a blade?"

"Yes," Kuwanan said, lowering Omeka, "I do. A time of great trial is upon the Empire. A vile usurper seeks the throne. Rokugan needs all of its loyal servants—now, more than ever."

"But I cannot relinquish this place to you while I yet live. I cannot put aside my duty."

Kuwanan sheathed Omeka and walked forward, placing himself within a katana's reach of Kaitokura. He heard murmurs from the Daidoji, but raised his hand.

"I will not see you or your noble followers die," he said, "simply to make a point. Therefore, I do not ask for your surrender. You are free to go, to join your comrades within Kyūden Kakita if it remains in Lion hands, or to return home if not, as you see fit." He locked his gaze onto the Matsu's through the rain. "Please, Kaitokura-san...your Empire needs you."

Kaitokura stared back for a moment, then turned to the remaining Lion. A brief conversation, then he turned back and sheathed his own katana.

"We acknowledge your victory, Kuwanan-sama." He gestured at the other Lion. "They will withdraw, leaving this place to you. There is one condition, however."

Kuwanan waited.



“In the end, we have failed. Our honor must be cleansed. That burden falls upon me, as I led our forces to this failure. For that reason, my own service to the Empire has come to an end. My condition is therefore this, Kuwanan-sama...that you be my second, and return my daishō and death poem to my family.”

Kuwanan wanted to object, but he thought about his sister, Hotaru, refusing to accept the seppuku of the Daidoji general who had lost the Battle of Three Trees Village. He had railed against her decision; how could he make the same one now, then?

So he nodded and said, “I would be honored to do so, Kaitokura-san.”

Lightning flashed, thunder roared, then the storm moved on to the west and the rain began to slacken.

The rain had washed the late summer dust from the grass, leaving it brightly green under Lady Sun’s morning light. Only in one place was it marred, its verdant purity darkened by a spill of blood, tacky and brown.

Kuwanan sat cross-legged beside it. Omeka, now cleaned of blood, rested across his knees. After a while, he looked up from the stained grass and past the palisade, now garrisoned by Crane bushi, at the looming sprawl of Kyūden Kakita beyond. While Kuwanan’s small force had attacked the strongpoint, the bulk of Uji’s army had stormed the gates. The Lion had defended stubbornly and well, though, and retained the palace. Still, Uji believed that, with the strongpoint now theirs, it would only be a matter of time before the Crane finally retook the palace.

But Matsu Kaitokura would not see it. His body had been taken away, returned under truce to the Lion. Now, besides the blood, all that remained were the twin blades of Kaitokura’s daishō, and his death poem in Kuwanan’s hand.

*A night storm rages
I would weather its fury
But the wind blinds me
Though not to the bitter truth
I am now lost in the rain*

Footsteps rustled the grass behind him. Kuwanan turned.

“We shall need a day,” Daidoji Uji said, “to prepare for the next assault, Doji-sama. Have you given thought to the role you will play in it?”

Kuwanan folded the paper and slipped it carefully into his obi. “I will not be participating in it, Uji-san, nor do you truly need me to. I must return Matsu Kaitokura’s daishō and death poem to his family. And then, I must travel to the Osari Plains.”



“To confront your sister.”

Kuwanan nodded. “I told Kaitokura that the Empire needed all of its loyal servants to stand against the craven pretenders who seek to seize power. Our own clan must likewise be united in that purpose. While its champion remains poisoned by the venom of a Scorpion, though, that cannot happen.”

Uji simply looked at Kuwanan for a moment, then nodded. “Whatever it was you sought in last night’s battle, Doji-sama, you seem to have found it.”

Kuwanan looked back at the bloodstained grass. “I did. The Heavens seem to believe I should continue along this path I have chosen. My failure to rescue Prince Sotorii may have been their way of ensuring my dedication to this journey, as difficult and painful as it will be.” He looked back at Uji. “And I am so dedicated, now, more than ever. And what of you, Uji-san? What do you intend?”

“I will retake Kakita Castle, and reestablish its garrison. I will then take the balance of this army to the Osari Plains.”

Kuwanan searched the Daidoji’s face for some hint of what he meant by that, but found only an inscrutable blandness. “When you arrive there, Uji-san,” he said, “you will likely face a choice. A very difficult one.”

“I am well aware of that, Doji-sama. In the meantime, you will need an escort, on this grim road you walk. I shall provide a contingent of Daidoji to you, to be that escort and to bear your banner to the Osari Plains.”

Kuwanan could still discern nothing certain from the Daidoji’s face, but he nodded nonetheless. “I am...grateful, Uji-san.”

The Daidoji daimyō bowed in turn and departed, leaving Kuwanan sitting in the grass, contemplating the blood that had washed away the stain of Matsu Kaitokura’s failure.

He looked up, at the palisade.

Have I washed away my own failure as thoroughly?

After a while, Kuwanan decided that he had.

More importantly, he believed Satsume would have thought so, too.

