

# THE SCORPION

by Stephen D. Sullivan

*"All of history is a lie. The truth depends on  
who does the telling—and who does the listening."  
—Bayushi Shoju*

## PROLOGUE: THE GATES OF HELL

Bayushi Shoju strode through the blood-clotted battlefield, looking for someone to kill. The land around him had been laid waste by war. Bare trees stretched bony fingers to a sky painted orange with fire and black with smoke. The blood of his enemies stained the land dark and made the small stream in Shoju's path run crimson.

In the distance, the Scorpion daimyo heard the cries of the dying echo among blasted hills. Nearby, only the stream's weeping voice disturbed the silence. Shoju's eyes found no foes remaining to be slain.

The veil of bloodlust lifted, and Shoju saw that many of his people lay dead on the battlefield as well. Eiji had long been a retainer for the daimyo's family. Now his eyes lay open to the sky and his mouth brimmed with his own blood. The retainer was not the last Scorpion casualty, not nearly.

As he crossed the stream, Shoju noticed Rumiko lying in the water. Her helmet had fallen off, revealing a gaping hole in the back of her skull, a wound not even her long black hair could conceal. A twinge shot through his heart for the loss of the rare and brave samurai.

Further heartbreak awaited Shoju as he topped the next rise. Before him lay another hill, covered with the bodies of Scorpion retainers. At the crest, propped against a pole supporting the clan's standard, stood Bayushi Tetsuo, Shoju's cousin's son.

A black crow perched on the young lieutenant's helmet and pecked at his eyes, first one and then the other. Tetsuo's open mouth made no protest to the bird's molestation, nor did he wave his one remaining hand to shoo the crow away. Instead, he held his fist clutched tight to the pole, which supported the tattered battle flag of the Scorpion Clan. Tetsuo's other fist lay at his feet. His right arm had been severed at the shoulder.

Shoju advanced quickly up the hill. Hot wind swept yellow dust from the battlefield and stung his eyes, making them tear. He reached the top of the hill, drew his sword, and swiftly killed the bird tormenting his lieutenant's corpse. The daimyo sheathed his katana. He slid the standard pole free of Tetsuo's dead fingers, and the young man's body eased gently to the ground.

Tetsuo's mouth seemed to form an unspoken question: "Why?"

Shoju had no answer. He stared down at Tetsuo's bird-damaged eyes. A reflection in the dead orbs saved the Scorpion daimyo's life.

Instinctively, Shoju jumped back—just in time. A huge jade samurai rose up before him from the pile of bodies. The warrior appeared untouched by the battle; whether he had lain in wait for the daimyo or had arrived as Shoju attended to Tetsuo, the Scorpion leader could not say.

The jade warrior raised his long sword high. The late afternoon sun reflected off it, splashing crimson into Shoju's eyes. The daimyo squinted against the glare and drew the sword of his Bayushi ancestors, bracing for the attack.

The samurai came at him swiftly, silently, his huge sword poised over his head. Shoju stepped aside. Their blades met. The sound of steel on steel echoed across the fields of the dead. As their swords parted, the Scorpion daimyo aimed a quick cut at the samurai's neck. The giant parried effortlessly and returned the attack in kind. Shoju caught the slice with his katana. His enemy's blade slid off, barely missing Shoju's shoulder.

The Scorpion circled left to gain the uphill advantage.

The jade warrior pressed the attack. Kicking bodies aside as he came, he forced Shoju back down the hill.

As he retreated, Shoju stepped on the helmet of a dead enemy. The lacquered bamboo gave way. There was no longer a skull underneath to support it. Cursing, Shoju toppled backward.

The samurai bore in, sword raised for the kill.

Years of practice took hold. Shoju lashed out with his right foot as he fell. His metal-shod toe connected with the samurai's left ankle—a vulnerable spot in the jade armor. The samurai lurched forward. Shoju rolled away from the intended blow.

The jade warrior caught himself before he fell and almost recovered. The Scorpion didn't give him a chance.

Lightning-swift, Shoju rolled to his knees and swung his katana in a wide arc. The sword sliced into the back of the samurai's knees, in a spot without armor. Shoju felt the satisfying bite as steel cut through tendons and muscles.

To his credit, the giant didn't cry out as he fell. Instead, he tried to turn toward the daimyo, but his legs no longer obeyed him.

The Scorpion thrust the Bayushi sword between the breastplate and the helmet of his foe. It emerged from the back of the jade samurai's neck. The giant crashed to the ground and moved no more.

Shoju pulled the sword of his ancestors from the samurai. Curiosity overwhelmed him. Who was this man who fought so fiercely? Shoju reached toward the demon-masked helmet and opened it.

A cold chill seized the daimyo's stomach as he gazed at the face of his foe. There was no one there—no body—nothing in the helmet. Only a mirror.

Shoju cursed and rose. He'd seen evil magic before—though never any quite like this. He crested

the hill once more and stood beside the body of his dead cousin, Tetsuo.

A vast sea of corpses rolled down from the hill, blackening the plain below. Here great armies had met and fought until not one man remained standing. Nothing moved. No sound disturbed the gruesome tableau save the plaintive whispering of the wind. Even the birds remained silent.

Before him, at the edge of the plain, Shoji saw the Forbidden City, sacred precinct of the emperor, rising like a monumental tomb in the land of the dead. Cautiously, with his sword still drawn, the daimyo walked down the hill toward the city.

He passed more of his people on the way, their faces drawn gaunt with pain and death. At some he paused a moment in contemplation, always cautious not to be surprised again by hidden foes. No more samurai appeared to bar his path.

At last the iron gates of the palace stood before him—silent, monolithic, impassable. Shoji wondered how he would surmount them, and what he would find within the sacred precincts.

As he stood thinking, a sound came from inside the city. Slowly, almost silently, the great gates swung open to welcome the Scorpion daimyo. A droning melody washed over him as the gates parted—a song of blood and death and victory. Shoji had heard the song all his life, but he could not remember its name. The tune stirred the fires in his soul.

Someone waited for him on the other side of the gate.

Beyond the portal, Shoji saw his lovely young wife, Bayushi Kachiko. She smiled, stretched out her pale arms, and said, "Greetings, Husband. The day is ours."