

# Children of the Empire Part I

By D.G. Laderoute

Jodan contemplated the dire situation confronting him.

There were few reasonable options open to him, and none that he could consider good. He finally placed his stone on the Go board such that he took *sente*, the initiative, opening a new front in the game. It was a bold move, perhaps even a rash one, as it left vulnerable one group of his stones, in a more crowded part of the board. The situation demanded a bold move, though, as it was the only way to even hope for a favorable outcome.

Bayushi Shoju didn't immediately react. He simply stared at the board for a time, a stone gripped between thumb and forefinger. Finally, his hand descended...and he placed the stone back among its unplayed fellows in a brightly enameled bowl.

"That is an unusual move," Shoju said, his gaze lifting from the board. "I expected a more conservative placement, that you would continue developing the position you'd already established." Behind his mask, Shoju's eyes smiled. "It seems, your majesty, that you have chosen to keep us all guessing at your next move."

Jodan rubbed his left hand with his right. The ache in both had become chronic, but the left always felt worse.

His left hand. The Left Hand of The Emperor held the fan, the symbol of political power and control in the Empire. But his left hand was weak and growing weaker by the day.

Jodan looked briefly at Shoju but let his gaze wander away from his friend and into the late summer brightness of the Imperial Gardens sprawling around them. He had originally intended to meet Shoju in his accustomed place of solitude in the Forbidden City, the spartan audience chamber in the Shrine to Hantei-no-Kami. Lately, that sparse room had become a place of tension—of deep thought, of compromise, of tough decisions with uncertain and possibly dire outcomes. It was like the *gote* placement of a Go stone, the opposite of *sente*: a place to merely continue what had gone before. Instead, he had settled on this unremarkable little teahouse tucked away in the Imperial Gardens as the place for their game.

"Bold and unexpected moves are, I must admit, somewhat foreign to me," Jodan said, his eyes on the colorful blooms of an azalea. "And perhaps it is unusual to learn so late in life, but sometimes bold and unexpected moves are the only reasonable way to proceed."

A breath of wind rustled the flowers and leaves around them. Shoju lifted his sake cup and sipped at its contents, a particularly good Yasuki brew. "Your words," he said, lowering the cup, "are certain...but their tone is less so."

Jodan turned back to Shoju. *Are you surprised? I am poised to surrender the throne, upend*

*my succession, name you as Sesshō, the Imperial Regent—in other words, plunge the Empire into chaos—and you discern uncertainty in my words?*

“Even now,” Jodan said, “I am second-guessing my placement of that stone. It was too bold, perhaps. Perhaps, with that stone, I have sealed a calamitous fate for myself.”

*As goes the fate of the Emperor, so goes that of the Empire.*

“It is not a poor move,” Shojū said.

“Perhaps, but is it the *right* move?”

Shojū shrugged, a lopsided motion that favored his stronger left arm. “A prophet may be able to say. The rest of us, however, must base what we do on what we know and believe, and then live with the consequences.”

Jodan nodded at the lone stone. “Indeed, we must all live with those.”

Shojū tilted his head in a thoughtful way, then said, “Your majesty—neither of us will know how the game unfolds until we play it out. In the meantime, we make the best moves we possibly can. We do not simply place the stones randomly. Our actions are guided by whatever knowledge and wisdom we possess. And, of course, by what has gone before.”

Jodan gave Shojū a sharp look. *What had gone before....* That was what truly preyed upon his mind, wasn’t it?

*Does Shojū know me so well?*

The Bayushi steepled his fingers. “Now, of course, we could analyze your reasons for placing the stone the way you did. However, I do not think your doubts regarding this game are really at issue. I do not think you invited me here today for an intimate and detailed study of Go.”

*Yes, it would appear that he does.*



Jodan gave a thin smile. “As I recall, *you* suggested we play today.”

Shojū offered another lopsided shrug. “Perhaps you are not the only one with doubts. You are proposing to place me in a...a remarkable position, your majesty.”

Jodan idly massaged his left hand again. His weaker hand. That was unlike Shojū, whose left hand was stronger by far than his withered right; an unexpected strength many of his opponents had discovered only too late.



"The correct thing," Jodan said, "would be for me to simply issue this edict regarding my succession, for you to play your part in enacting it, and for neither of us to discuss it any further." He gave a rueful smile. "But that is not how these things really work, is it? As I now have concerns about placing that stone, I have...concerns...about the edict Toturi will proclaim to the Empire. How could I not? How could you not?"

"Your majesty, a moment ago I suggested we could analyze your placement of that stone, to determine why you chose to place it as you did. Perhaps it would be more fruitful to analyze what caused you to decide as you did regarding your abdication and succession."

"There were many reasons."

*Was that really true? Had it not actually been remarkably simple?*

"There was one incident in particular, yes?"

Jodan looked back at the azaleas. *He knows my mind indeed. This will make him an excellent Regent...will it not?*

"Yes," Jodan said. "My sons, and their...duel."

"My son was involved as well, your majesty. Dairu gave me his recounting of what happened—but you have not described what happened to me in more than a passing way."

*Because it was painful, and humiliating, and so...unnecessary. It was an abject failure for my oldest son, Sotorii.*

*Worse, does that not mean it was also an abject failure for his father...for me?*

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### *Six Months Ago*

Bayushi Dairu stabbed a triumphant finger at the copy of *The Articles of Heaven*, a treatise on legal reform in the Empire in the wake of the brutal reign of Hantei XVI, the Steel Chrysanthemum.

"Here, Daisetsu-san!" he said, unable to keep a hint of victorious glee from his voice. "These are the Miya daimyō's own words, and they prove me correct! Torture is *not* to be used on an accused if there is any doubt as to his soundness of mind. That is a point for me; so I am in the lead, now!"

Hantei Daisetsu offered a bow of concession. "Indeed, you are, Dairu-san. Which is...very unusual."

"*Very unusual?*" Dairu put on a face of exaggerated outrage. "I may not always be correct, but I don't think it happens so rarely it is *very unusual*."

Daisetsu grinned. "My apologies," he said, bowing again. "That is not what I mean. This fact is unusual. I have been led to believe that, in the quest for justice, no one is exempt from torture." He couldn't stop the grin from fading. "It would appear that our forebearers were somewhat more...tolerant, perhaps, than we are today." Narrowing his eyes at the treatise, he added, "Anyone who has seen torture should be outraged by it."

Daisetsu had seen it. His sensei in matters of law had thought it important he witness this fundamental precept of Imperial justice. There had been pain and terror in the dark little room; pain and terror that could not just be seen and heard but *smelled*. Wouldn't the one being tortured simply say what they believed their tormentors wished to hear? How was that *just*?

Daisetsu blinked, filing the fact, and its reference in *The Articles of Heaven*, away for

future consideration. Right now, he had more important matters to address. Namely...

"Now it is my turn, Dairu-san," he said, "and I have every intention of evening our score."

What had begun as an argument with Dairu over the correctness of a passage from Akodo's *Leadership* had become a great contest. They had come here, to the wan light and dusty, old-paper smell of the Scorpion Guest House's library in the Forbidden City, determined to prove who had the better knowledge of obscure, scholarly facts about the Empire. Each had dredged some bit of what seemed to be the most trivial knowledge, something gleaned from some essay or treatise they had studied under the watchful eye of tutors and flung it at the other as a challenge. *Leadership* still sat in the center of the table, but now copies of *The Articles of Heaven* had joined it, as had Shosuro Furuyari's great play, *The Mask*, Rezan's even greater play *Awakening*, the famous essay *On Peace*, even the pillow-book *Sanshien's Fascination* (which was nowhere near as scandalous as Daisetsu had secretly hoped). A half-dozen more works sat stacked nearby. They had both won and lost each other's challenges, so only a single point separated them. It was, Daisetsu thought, most exciting.

He pursed his lips in thought. "Yes. I am sure you will be unable to answer this question, Dairu-san." He started to stand. "Now, I believe I saw a copy of *Winter* over there—"

A sudden commotion at the entrance to the library cut him off. A harsh voice snapped, "Out of my way, you fool!" as someone stormed into the room.

Daisetsu sank back into his place and closed his eyes. *No...*

Hantei Sotorii strode among the scroll-racks, melted snow beaded and glistening as he moved. He stopped and looming over the table where Daisetsu and Dairu knelt. A servant





followed, a look of stark terror etched onto his face, probably because Dairu had ordered him and Daisetsu to not be disturbed; an order that had not accounted for the tempestuous arrival of the Crown Prince of Rokugan.

Sotorii's fingers curled, working to become fists. He glowered at Daisetsu. "I had thought, brother, that you were to practice your calligraphy today."

The word *brother* had fallen from Sotorii's mouth like a dropped stone. Daisetsu forced himself to ignore it, drawing on the serenity of the otherwise silent library to maintain a semblance of calm.

"I did, brother. And now that is done, and I am here."

Sotorii's glare swung from Daisetsu, to the piled scrolls, to Dairu, back to Daisetsu. "Here doing what, exactly?"

Daisetsu placed his hands on his knees, the only way to avoid them *actually* becoming fists. *What business is it of yours? You are not Emperor—yet—I need not answer to you. Just go away!*

Dairu gestured to the still-cringing servant, shooing him away. "Hantei-sama," he said to Sotorii, "your esteemed brother and I are engaging in a contest of wits. We each pose a question to the other, based on the great literature of the Empire. Whoever answers the most correctly shall be the victor."

Sotorii's scowl hardened. "Why? What is the point?"

Dairu blinked. "The point is to..." He trailed off into an uncertain look at Daisetsu.

*The point is to pass some enjoyable time with a friend*, Daisetsu thought, *not that it's even remotely any of your concern, you blustering ox*. He kept his hands on his knees and said, "The point is to simply challenge each other, and ourselves at the same time."

Sotorii swiveled his glare from one to the other, then nodded curtly. "Fine. I will take part as well."

*I will take part*. A statement. Not a question nor a request; just a flat, uncompromising statement of how things would be.

Daisetsu's fingers cramped around his knees. Again, he thought, *You are not yet the Emperor—but it doesn't matter. You think you are entitled to anything you want. Simply by the circumstances of your birth, you believe you can demand whatever you wish and have it. You earn nothing, but expect everything*.

Which was blasphemy, of course. The Celestial Order was as graven stone. Sotorii was the Emperor's eldest son, he *was* the heir to the throne, he *could* expect to have essentially whatever he wished. Dairu had left instructions for them not to be disturbed, but none of the Scorpion guards at the door, or the retainers or servants within the guest house, would ever presume to gainsay the Crown Prince of Rokugan. Having somehow learned Daisetsu was here, he simply crashed his way into the place and now, here he was with yet another demand: to participate in their contest—whether either of them wished or not.

*I do not care if it is blasphemous to think so—I do not care what the Celestial Order says, or*

*that he is the heir. This is not right. It is not fair. Sotorii is not Dairu's friend. He cares nothing for him, for spending time with him until now, of course, when I am doing so.*

Dairu had apparently been waiting for Daisetsu to speak. Finally, the young Bayushi broke the lingering silence, glancing at Daisetsu as he said, "Very well, Hantei-sama. The contest is quite simple. We—"

"No," Daisetsu said.

Sotorii and Dairu both looked at him.

"No," Daisetsu said again, locking his gaze on his brother's. "We can hold another contest, at another time. This one is between Dairu-san and me and is nearly done."

Sotorii tried to loom over Daisetsu and Dairu. "You can hold another contest *now*. Just start this one over again."

Daisetsu shook his head. "No."

"How dare you refuse me! I demand—"

"I do not care *what* you demand!" Daisetsu snapped, leaping to his feet. "You are being rude, brother! You are a guest in this place! It is not your place to demand anything!"

Sotorii flinched slightly as Daisetsu rose to face him, but quickly stepped forward, crowding his younger brother. "You presume to call me *rude*? You're the one, brother, refusing to allow me to join in your foolish little game! As for being a mere guest, have you forgotten I am heir to the throne? Any place in Rokugan would be honored to have me in attendance." He swung on Dairu. "Isn't that right, Dairu-san?"

Dairu, who had been keeping his eyes carefully averted from the confrontation, glanced up only briefly. "Of course, Hantei-sama. Your presence here is...is indeed an honor." As soon as he'd finished speaking, the young Scorpion's eyes flicked away again.

Daisetsu tried to offer his friend a look of encouragement, but Dairu simply huddled on the other side of the table and kept his gaze anywhere that wasn't the two brothers.

*Which is typical for those who must deal with Sotorii. He cares nothing for those around him, only himself.*

Daisetsu turned back to his brother's scowl. "Dairu-san says only what he thinks you wish to hear."

*Like the man being tortured.*

Daisetsu had started to consider his next words, but the renewed thoughts of torture suddenly sent his mouth racing ahead of any prudence, making him fling what was truly in his heart at Sotorii. "You honor no one with your presence, Sotorii. You are an obnoxious fool, believing that just because your rear will someday fill the throne that everyone must dance to your insufferable demands." He shook his head. "No, brother. Not this time. You are not welcome here...so go, now, and leave us alone."

Sotorii's eyes widened as Daisetsu spoke; by the time he was finished, they were almost comically wide, as though about to pop out of his head. But there was no humor in any of this.



"You have gone too far, brother," Sotorii finally said. "You have insulted me. And by insulting me, you insult the Celestial Heavens themselves. So, I...I challenge you to a duel, so that the Heavens can render proper judgment upon you, in turn."

Daisetsu blinked. *A duel? Don't be ridiculous.*

He almost snorted a laugh at Sotorii, his usual response to the reckless, blustery temper to which he'd become so accustomed. His brother would rant on a little longer, and then storm away in a dramatic huff. Yes, for the next day or so he would be as ornery as a *mujina*, a nasty little trickster spirit from Sakkaku, but Daisetsu was used to that as well.

Except there was no reckless temper in Sotorii's eyes this time. There was only a cold and ill purpose.

Daisetsu frowned. "Do not be ridiculous, brother. I am not going to *duel* you."

"So, you admit that you have wronged me. Or are you simply a coward, unwilling to back up your words with steel, as Sincerity and Honor demand?"

Daisetsu almost laughed at his brother's invoking of the two Bushidō tenets. How ludicrous. This wasn't about Honor or Sincerity. This was about the heir to the Throne of Rokugan acting like a spoiled child and throwing a tantrum when confronted about it. Daisetsu bit back the laugh and opened his mouth to perfunctorily dismiss Sotorii and return to his amusement with Dairu, but the Scorpion spoke first, standing as he did.

"I agree that you are an honored guest, Hantei Sotorii-sama," he said, his voice solemn, "but your behavior has been..." Dairu swallowed. "It has been inappropriate. I must object to it on behalf of my clan, whose hospitality you currently enjoy. Therefore, I...I accept your challenge on behalf of Hantei Daisetsu-sama, and I will stand as his champion in this matter."

Shocked, Daisetsu turned to look at his friend. "Dairu-san, no—this is not necessary!"

"Yes, Hantei-sama, it is. An honorable challenge has been issued. It must be answered. Since we have both had our honor called into question, I will answer it for both of us."

Daisetsu swung back to Sotorii, but his brother only shrugged. "Fine. If you wish for the Heavens to judge you as well, Dairu-san, so be it."



Daisetsu could only stare and shake his head. He suddenly felt like he rode a panicked horse, one that only galloped faster and faster even as he tried to rein it in.

*No—this is insanity! We will not do this!*

Before he could find the words, however, Sotorii said, “Very well then. I shall meet you at the dōjō in the Imperial Training Grounds in one hour.” With that, he bowed, turned, and stalked away.

Daisetsu just stared at his brother’s retreating back. The horse galloped faster still, now an instant from disaster.

*Insanity. Because of the foolishness that is honor and Bushidō, we have embraced insanity.*

