

# Children of the Empire Part III

By D.G. Laderoute

By the time the hour had passed and Sotorii had entered the dōjō at the Imperial Training Grounds, the tears were done, the desolate misery of rejection gone. Only the anger remained, and Sotorii embraced it. Now, as he waited in the cool gloom of the dōjō, it coiled inside him, like a snake from the Ivory Kingdoms he had once seen during a festival...a menacing, hooded thing that struck like venomous lightning.

Movement at the dōjō's entrance. Sotorii braced himself to face...

Not Daisetsu and Dairu, but his father. The Emperor entered the dōjō, followed by his entourage of retainers and guards—and the Emerald Champion, Doji Satsume.

Sotorii gritted his teeth and bowed.

*Why are you here, father? Have you come to stop this from happening? To deny my rightful redress of grievance?*

A coiled snake...

*You see, father, you are part of the problem. While you live, I am not taken seriously...and the Empire topples ever further into chaos. But when you are gone, and I am Emperor...then, I will never be ignored or rejected again.*

*When I am Emperor...*

A momentary pang. The Empire he would inherit was toppling into chaos. When he was Emperor, it would be upon him to put it right.

*Will I be able to?*

He shoved the sudden doubt away. Of course, he would be able to. He was not his father. He was not weak. He was not wrong.

"I understand," the Emperor said, returning Sotorii's bow, "that you are to duel your brother over some dispute."

Sotorii winced at his father's dismissive words, some dispute, as though they had bickered over a broken toy. "He offered me a grave insult, your majesty," Sotorii said, fighting to keep his voice appropriately neutral. "No samurai of the Empire would allow such a grievance to go unanswered."

Sotorii braced himself. Now, of course, his father would say, "You are not yet samurai..." But even if they had been, he'd still insist that they work out their differences as brothers...as children...

It was to Sotorii's profound surprise, then, that the Emperor said, "Indeed, you are quite correct. I am merely here to observe."

"I...see. Very well, your majesty."

The Emperor said nothing else, simply moving with his entourage to the edge of the sparring circle in which Sotorii stood. He had only just done so when two more figures entered the dōjō. Sotorii's anger coiled more tightly as they approached.

The Emperor turned to the new arrivals. "Daisetsu-san," he said, "step forward." Daisetsu did so, and the Emperor went on. "It is my understanding that you and Sotorii-san are to engage in a duel over a matter of insult. It is my further understanding that Bayushi Dairu-san is to stand as your champion."

Daisetsu shot a scornful glance at Sotorii, then nodded. "My apologies, your majesty, for wasting your time in such a way—"

"It is not your place to apologize," the Emperor cut in, "unless the Heavens ordain it so."

Daisetsu looked back at their father. Again, Sotorii was pleased to see a sudden look of doubtful concern on his face.

*You have brought this on yourself, brother.*

In his typically dour, clipped tone, Doji Satsume said, "Ordinarily, your majesty, samurai would draw steel to settle such a matter. But none of them have yet passed their gempuku, so they are not entitled to wield the katana. The wooden bokken will have to suffice."

Sotorii retrieved a wooden practice sword, then returned to the sparring circle and took his place opposite Dairu. Satsume stepped forward from the Emperor's retinue and named the grievance, followed by the conditions of the duel—to first strike only, and then only to the torso, to be counted as victory.

The Emerald Champion stepped back, leaving Sotorii facing Dairu. Both were far from skilled duelists, so they each stood as they had been trained, trying to find a perch on the razor-edge of explosive action and reaction that was iaijutsu, the single-strike style of dueling pioneered by Kakita so long ago.

Sotorii breathed as Satsume had taught him, trying to relax, and finding his center, the place where thought and intent and action all became one. But his sensei had never said he might find a coiled snake already there, charged with bitter venom that made him want to simply lash out—





Shouting a war cry, Dairu became a blur of motion.

Sotorii shouted and moved in response, the fangs of the snake striking out—

At empty air.

A burst of pain blew through his side, turning his own shout into a hoarse gasp.

And now Dairu stood behind him, their respective strikes having taken them past one another.

Sotorii turned to face the Scorpion. Pain blossomed across his ribs again, but he ignored it.

I am supposed to bow now...was what Sotorii thought, even as he raised the bokken and struck out with it, a blow that would have crushed Dairu's skull. Dairu ducked and the bokken barely missed him.

*I will not bow...not now, not ever...it isn't right, it isn't fair, I wasn't wrong, I was right, the Heavens are wrong, everyone is wrong—*

Dairu raised his own bokken in defense, but Sotorii swung again, again, in time with the words that thundered through his head.

*I wasn't wrong...it's not fair, it's not right...I wasn't wrong—*

Something grabbed his arm, holding back his furious blows.

"Sotorii...no!"

It was his brother. Daisetsu held his arm. Held him back. Protected Dairu. Protected his friend...his friend.

*But...I wasn't wrong!*

Sotorii yanked free of Daisetsu's grip. He wanted to leave, needed to leave...to be somewhere, anywhere else that wasn't here. Hefting the bokken, he made to throw it away...

But Daisetsu flinched and shrank back, apparently believing he was about to be attacked. Sotorii shook his head.

*Brother, no—!*

Now something else intervened, a mountain of armor bearing the Seppun laurel crest. The honor guard stood ready to take what he believed would be blows meant for Daisetsu.

Sotorii shook his head again. "No!"

But the Seppun simply stood, an implacable wall of purpose.

"Sotorii-san," the Emperor said, "that is enough...!"

Sotorii finally flung aside the bokken. Now he did run. He ran...away. To somewhere else. To anywhere that wasn't here.

He ran, perhaps never to stop.

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Today

"Perhaps," Jodan said, looking back at the azaleas, "I should not have allowed the duel to proceed. This so-called grievance, as it was reported to me, was really such a minor thing."

*Except it wasn't. A dislodged pebble can start an avalanche—a minor thing. If one could forestall an avalanche and stave off calamity—then is that not the right thing to do?*

Shoju's eyes narrowed. "Your majesty, I am curious...since the incident in question occurred in our clan's guest house, who reported it to you, such that you could arrange to attend the dōjō in the first place?"

Jodan couldn't resist a smile. "Does it bother you, Master of Secrets, that I am able to learn of things that occur in even your shadowy holdings?"

"As I said, I was simply...curious."

Jodan said nothing, enjoying a rare moment of advantage over the Scorpion Champion. But the smile soon faded. "I had hoped allowing them to duel would serve to teach each of them something of Bushidō, and the sacred act of the duel. To teach them a useful lesson, as it were." He minutely adjusted a stone on the Go board. "However, as I said, Sotorii failed to adhere to Bushidō at all. By comparison, his brother was a virtual paragon of the tenets." He looked back up at Shoju. "I believe lessons were learned...just not the ones I envisioned."

"And they were not just learned by your sons and Dairu."

"No, they were not. I learned valuable lessons, as well." Jodan realized he was beginning to slouch and forced himself to sit upright. "Which returns us to the matter at hand. You are correct that Sotorii will not take his brother's ascension well. It is more unpleasantness, but it cannot be denied."

"It will, indeed, be something that needs to be addressed."

*Yet another problem I am leaving to my successor; yet another problem for which I simply have no solution.*

Jodan rubbed his aching left hand. "What would you suggest?"

"I confess that I am not sure. Nonetheless, he does represent a potentially disruptive influence."

Jodan gave Shoju a narrow-eyed look. Does he speak in veiled terms now, to hold an advantage over me? He considered simply allowing it to pass but couldn't. "I must admit to some concern, when I hear the Champion of the Scorpion Clan declare someone a potentially disruptive influence."

"Your majesty, it would be most inappropriate for even a champion of a Great Clan to make any such statement about the Emperor's son. I speak now as your proposed Imperial Regent. In that capacity, I do put voice to my concerns regarding Sotorii—particularly regarding what role he will play after his brother's ascension."



"Well, he will be in the same position as any younger sibling of the heir. He would be married to a suitable Otomo and given an appropriate Imperial office."

"In other words, oblivion. That is how he will see it, anyway, even if you were to name him Imperial Advisor or Chancellor. In fact, such senior appointments would probably be even more problematic, as they would keep Sotorii close to the throne and his brother, the Emperor."

Sudden weariness rolled over Jodan like a slow wave. He should put it aside, focus his mind on this, find a solution...

*But I am so tired. So tired of second-guessing, of being uncertain if what I do is the right thing or the wrong thing.*

He finally said, "I have every confidence you will find a solution to recommend to me regarding this matter, Shoji-san."

*This one, and so many more.*

"I will give the matter due consideration, your majesty," Shoji said, then apparently returned his attention to the game and his move. Jodan was content to let him, and just sit in the warmth of Lady Sun. But a stray thought plucked at him.

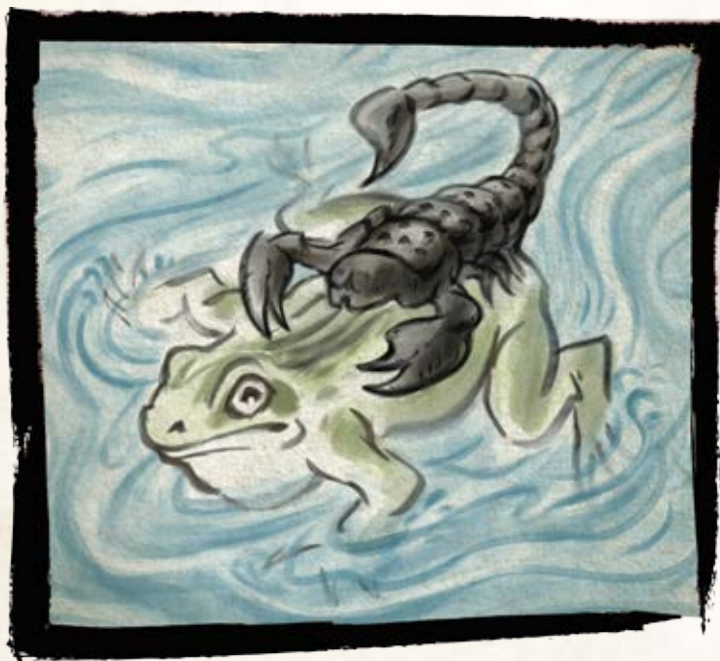
"Actually," Jodan said, "it is my turn to be curious about something. I wonder about the role of your son in this whole affair. By all accounts, he conducted himself honorably and correctly."

"That is an issue, your majesty?"

"Of course not. But...he is your son and will, someday, ascend to your place as Champion of the Scorpion." Jodan gave his friend a thin smile. "I have become well accustomed to his father's subtle and many-layered approach to things. I cannot help but wonder if the son follows closely in his father's footsteps."

"You wonder if Dairu influenced, or even manipulated what transpired between your sons?"

"An unseemly question, when put so bluntly."



Shoji's eyes smiled again.

"But you do not withdraw it." The Scorpion Champion had picked up a stone to place on the board and now studied it. "Dairu did confess to me that he saw an opportunity in the strife between your sons. He believed that by offering to stand as Daisetsu's champion, he would further ingratiate himself to your younger son. At the same time, he believed that besting the heir to the throne in an honorable duel would generally enhance his reputation."

“Although win the enmity of the one whom, as far he knew, would one day be Emperor.”

“A fact of which he was well aware. Yet, for good or for ill, and for reasons known only to him, he has placed his loyalty with Daisetsu. The loyalty of a Scorpion, once offered, will stand beyond dishonor or death.”

Jodan met Shoji's eyes and nodded. “I know.”

Shoji again resumed studying the Go board, but Jodan stood. “I am afraid, my friend,” he said, “that I grow very weary and must rest.”

“We can resume our game another time, then.”

Jodan looked at the gardens around them...at the stately buildings of the Forbidden City beyond them.

*And beyond that, the Empire.*

*I am so tired.*

“That Go set,” he said, “was a gift from the Crane Champion to one of my predecessors, Hantei XXVI, at a Winter Court. It has passed from each Emperor to the next ever since.” Once again, he met Shoji's eyes. “That stone I played, whether its placement was wise or foolish, was the last I shall ever play on it. This game is now yours, Shoji-san.”

“Your majesty, I am not worthy to accept such a beautiful—”

“Please,” Jodan said, “let us stipulate that I have offered, and you have refused it twice. Now, take it. I am sure you will find no lack of opponents, both old and new.”

Shoji offered a bow of thanks. “Of that, your majesty, I have no doubt.”

Jodan took his leave of the teahouse but didn't return immediately to his chambers. Instead, he wandered the gardens for a time, simply enjoying the sight and fragrance of the many blossoms.

