

Black and White

By D.G. Laderoute

Hour of the Ox—The Imperial Court Chamber

Bayushi Shoju stepped onto the penultimate level of the Great Dais, but refrained from looking at the Chrysanthemum Throne looming above him. Instead, he turned to look across the vast court chamber. The immense sweep of floor, dark stone polished almost mirror-bright, gleamed with light pooled beneath the few lanterns still kept lit at this late hour. Ponderous gloom enveloped the rest. It was meant to be awe-inspiring—this locus of Imperial power—and it was.

But a component of awe was fear, and Shoju was, indeed, afraid.

The critical business of the Empire happened in this place. Petitions were presented and debated...schemes were advanced or thwarted...wars were declared. Thousands of lives could turn on a handful of words spoken here—especially those uttered from the massive throne behind him.

But such words were not the source of his fear. He was the Champion of the Scorpion Clan; his own words could shape or end lives. No, Shoju's fear arose from...

Something else.

He looked into his left hand. Two small stones, pieces from a game of Go, sat in his palm. Both were jade—one so darkly green, like ancient mountain pines, to be almost black; the other as white as winter sun on snow. The white stone had been the final stone the Emperor had played in their aborted game earlier that day, in the Imperial Gardens. The black had been his own, his intended response to the Emperor's stone, but never played.

What am I afraid of?

He closed his fist. The answer was simple. He was afraid of the future that would begin here, in this place, in the morning. The edict announcing the Emperor's abdication, naming Daisetsu as his heir, and Shoju as *Sesshō*, Imperial Regent, would be proclaimed here. The future as Shoju had believed he understood it would change...No. It would *end* once that edict was read, and a new future would begin. It was as though, in the midst of a game of Go, the rules and even the objective had suddenly changed, leaving no way of knowing how the game would progress.

But this was no game. This was the future of Rokugan. And the sudden, yawning uncertainty about it made Shoju afraid.

He finally turned to the throne. A pillar to the left of it was inscribed, "Revere heaven, love people." A pleasant enough assertion, but devoid of any real weight. The pillar to the right,



though, read, “All is right with the world.” Shoju frowned at this, a statement presented as a certainty, because all was certainly *not* right with the world—

He froze. Someone had entered the court chamber, their sandals beating a soft cadence on the polished stone. Shoju’s left hand tensed toward his *wakizashi*, but it still held the Go stones...

He relaxed as he recognized the gait of the person approaching.

His gaze still on the throne, he said, “It must be urgent business that brings you here, my wife, at such a late hour.”

The footsteps stopped at the base of the dais, but Bayushi Kachiko said nothing and Shoju finally turned.

Kachiko made no move to ascend the dais, even though her office as Imperial Advisor at least technically gave her more justification to stand upon it than him. Instead, she bowed. But the movement—her entire manner—had a perfunctory tension, an uncharacteristic hardness to her usual, fluid grace.

“I must speak to you, my lord,” she said. “It is...important.”

“Very well.”

“I would prefer that we speak elsewhere, my lord. What I must discuss with you is a matter of...considerable sensitivity.” She gestured toward one of the many side rooms opening off the court chamber.

Thousands of lives could turn on a handful of words spoken on that mirrored floor...

Shoju descended the dais and walked with Kachiko to the nearest side room, sliding the door closed behind them. No delicate paper construct, this door was thick rosewood, richly carven and elegant—and, like the room itself, proof against the passage of sound. Court delegates could come here, away from the great chamber, and discuss things they didn’t wish overheard. That Kachiko wished to speak here...

When she turned to face him, Shoju saw it etched in her face, portrayed in her every movement, every nuance of her body language. Heard it, in the uncharacteristic hesitation in her voice.

Like him, Kachiko was afraid. And angry. And there was a hint of...anticipation? But what had she to fear that would bring her here at this hour?



Kachiko moved to the far side of a long table of polished rosewood that matched the door. Sumptuous cushions surrounded it, but she remained standing, assembling the words she was about to say. It was only a momentary pause, barely of note—if this was anyone else. But this was Bayushi Kachiko, who could assemble an entire arsenal of lies in the time it took a lesser person to draw a breath. Shoju wanted whatever unpleasant truth had brought her here revealed for what it was, not portrayed as she wanted it to be. So he preempted her, speaking first.

“Something troubles you, my wife.”

He saw her artfully crafted words crumble behind her eyes. This was unlike her, too. Shoju was one of very few in Rokugan who could even hope to match wits with Kachiko...but it should not be this easy. Apparently giving up on speaking, she instead settled on extracting a rolled document from her obi and offered it to Shoju.

He accepted it in his right hand, allowing the mulberry paper to unroll under its own weight. His left remained clenched around the Go stones as he read the script, penned in a precise hand he recognized as Akodo Toturi's.

An edict...

...will step down from the Throne...

...Prince Daisetsu, the Thirty-Ninth Hantei Emperor of Rokugan...

...will ascend as Emperor under the guidance of a regent, the esteemed Champion of the Scorpion Clan...

Behind Kachiko's mask lay anger, anticipation and...something else.

His left hand tightened, the Go stones becoming two bright spots of pain. “How did this come to be in your possession?”

Kachiko's gaze dipped almost imperceptibly. “It was retrieved from the body of the Emperor.”

The body of...

The Emperor was dead?

Shoju opened his hand, looked at the Go stones, and recalled the Emperor's words from... what, only a few hours earlier?

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, Shoju-san.

He tucked the Go stones into a small pocket inside his obi.

“My lord?”

Shoju looked at Kachiko. He had no idea how long he'd been standing in silence.

“My lord,” Kachiko said, “if you require time—”

“No. Tell me everything you know.”

Kachiko hesitated, then began speaking. She described regicide in a way that seemed almost matter-of-fact, like a recitation from some historical treatise of the Ikoma. Indeed, in some



future time, this would all *be* just historical fact, names and places, events and times dutifully recorded in dry, scholarly script. It wouldn't convey the appalling horror of the Crown Prince of Rokugan murdering his father, the Emperor, with the ancestral Hantei blade.

Kachiko fell silent, her awful tale complete.

Except it wasn't. Her eyes, darkly framed by her mask, contained further words. Shoju said nothing and simply waited.

Kachiko finally said, "I am sorry, my...husband. I know the Emperor was your friend."

She had been about to say *my lord*, but changed it to *my husband*. Had she had been anyone else, Shoju would have known the motive behind it—whether genuine concern for his feelings or manipulative calculation.

Had she been anyone else.

But she was still afraid. Why? What could be worse than this?

Jodan was dead. Killed by his own son, the Crown Prince of Rokugan, on the very eve of this edict's proclamation.

Standing before the Chrysanthemum Throne, he had been afraid of the future. But now the Emperor was dead—murdered. Where was Sotorii now? Where was Daisetsu?

As the edict dictated, now Daisetsu would take the throne with Shoju as Regent. What could they do with Sotorii? How would this appear to the Empire? Would the Empire even believe the edict? Or would they think it a plot, a scheme, an attempt by the Scorpion to seize power—

Where was Toturi?

And what was Kachiko's role in this disaster? What still worried her?

To arrest the flood of thoughts, Shoju closed his eyes, and then seized on the most urgent thread. "Where is Sotorii?"



"He is under guard," Kachiko replied, "in his chambers."

Shoju took a long, slow breath and let it out. "Very well. He will be held accountable, of course." He looked at the edict. "The Emperor was correct. Prince Sotorii will not succeed him. Prince Daisetsu will be the new Hantei."

Kachiko shifted, her demeanor becoming more open as she prepared to speak, but somehow also more closed and wary.



This is what she is afraid of—whatever she is about to say to me.

“There are...alternatives, my husband.”

Shoju’s thoughts went abruptly still as a pond. Eyes still on the edict, he asked, “What do you mean?”

“I spoke to Sotorii when I found him and...the terrible thing he had done. He understands the reality facing him. He knows the throne cannot be his. Unless...” Kachiko took a breath. “Unless the Empire hears that its Emperor has ascended to his righteous place in Tengoku only because it was his time to depart the mortal realm.”

Shoju looked up from the edict. “What are you suggesting?”

Kachiko’s voice became suddenly hard, sharp with anger. “Why did you not tell me about the Emperor’s intent? About that edict you hold? Why would you keep such a thing from me?”

He understood her fear, now. And these words explained her anger. That left...anticipation?

“Because, I chose to honor the Emperor’s wishes in this,” he said. “Clearly, though, you do not feel that was justified or even wise.” He pushed his gaze into hers. “Why?”

Kachiko paced two steps. “Something so important, so...profound, for the Empire and our clan! How can you not see that this is a thing I should have known! Do you not trust me? How could you not? Even *Hotaru* would trust me enough to—”

Frozen silence fell at the end of Kachiko’s words. Shoju saw the stunned look on her face, her horrified realization of what she had just said. Bayushi Kachiko did not lose control, ever. And yet, she just had.

“I trusted you,” Shoju said, “enough to accept your relationship with the Crane Champion.” Before she could even consider replying, he went on, “But neither that, nor the fact that I did not tell you about this edict is the issue here. You have said something, or done something, which you believe would have been affected by your knowing. What?”

Kachiko tried to lash back, desperate to snatch back a glimmer of control. “If I am to be effective, to function as your—”

“What have you done, Kachiko? Why would you suggest lying to the Empire about the death of its Emperor?”

Kachiko paced two steps back to where she’d started, then pointed at the edict, still in his right hand.

“I had no knowledge of that,” she said. “If I had...” She stopped and shook her head. “But I didn’t. So I seized the moment, my lord, for the good of the Empire and, yes, of the Scorpion. If Sotorii were to inherit the throne following the death of his father, the Empire would naturally accept it. He is the Crown Prince, after all.” She took a step toward Shoju now, getting as close as the table would allow. “And then, throughout his reign, he would be indebted to us. Through him, we—you—could do the things that need to be done to make the Empire whole and strong. He is a fool, of course, but you could—”



Shoju strode around the table. It had, of course, been only a psychological barrier, not a physical one. As he did, he swept a short, wicked knife from where he kept it concealed and pressed the blade to Kachiko's throat.

"What did you say to Sotorii?"

"My lord, please—!"

"What did you say to him?"

Kachiko winced. In this instant of fury, she probably saw his brother, Aramoro, in him. He didn't care...even hoped so.

A fraction more pressure, and she bleeds. A fraction more than that...and she dies.

Kachiko swallowed. Shoju felt it through the knife. "I told him that he could still ascend as Emperor. I did not know about the edict! If I had—!"

"If you had, you would not now be putting your wishes above those of your Emperor? You would not have then sought to blackmail the new Emperor to do your bidding? Only knowledge of this edict would have been sufficient to keep you from putting such things into motion? Is *that* what you are saying, my wife?"

Kachiko reeled under Shoju's words. He still did not care. And now there was blood on her neck where the blade dimpled the porcelain-smooth skin...a bead of crimson. Another.

Kachiko swallowed again. "The Empire is in deep distress, my lord. The Emperor was correct. Sotorii was not fit for the throne. Daisetsu may be more worthy, but once he comes of age, your regency will end. Think of the choice. A certainty of the power to shape Rokugan's fate for the full reign of Sotorii, and against that, a brief regency, followed by the *possibility* of influencing the Empire's future. As I said, there are alternatives, my lord. My *husband*."

Shoju held Kachiko's gaze locked to his. Fear, anger, anticipation. He understood them all now. He thought back to Kachiko's words as they had strolled in the Imperial Gardens that spring, but now it seemed that years had passed since they were spoken.

...many Hantei emperors have come and gone...None have enjoyed the favor of heaven as clearly as the first...and this one, the thirty-eighth—

And he had replied, *Your words are becoming dangerous, my wife, if you are suggesting that the Celestial Heavens have withdrawn their favor from this Hantei.*

She had demurred, but that was exactly what she had meant, before going on to hint at him someday taking the throne. Her fear and anger, her anticipation...Her ambition. He understood it all.

For the first time, Shoju understood Kachiko. Understood her completely.

He released her and returned the knife to its sheath. "You are wrong. There are no alternatives." He raised the edict. "There is only this. The Emperor's final wish...His final command. Toturi will proclaim this today, as planned."

Kachiko simply nodded, the beads of blood bright against her neck. "As you wish," she said, striving to shape her voice back into its accustomed, neutral self. "I will speak to Kakita Yoshi



and Akodo Toturi and make arrangements for court to be convened as early as possible.”

Shoju nodded in turn, and Kachiko moved toward the door. She stopped with her hand upon the carven handle and looked at her husband. “I could have destroyed the edict, Shoju. But I did not. I brought it to you.”

“Which is the only reason you are not now being dragged to Traitor’s Grove?”

Kachiko’s eyes widened, but they remained locked on his. In them, Shoju saw a truth that he knew they both understood...that they may still be husband and wife, but in every other way that mattered, they’d become strangers to one another. The future, as Shoju had believed he understood it, had indeed ended, and something new had begun.

Kachiko slid the door open and they left the secretive little room. Shoju turned his back on Kachiko and moved back toward the foot of the dais.

Behind him, Kachiko stopped.

“My lord,” she said, “there is one other matter. Prince Daisetsu is not in his chambers.”

Shoju stopped and lifted his eyes to the throne. “Have him found and brought here. He must be present when the edict is proclaimed.”

Silence.

Shoju turned.

“As I said, my lord,” Kachiko said, “we have not yet found him. Nor do we yet know all of Sotorii’s movements and actions tonight.”

Shoju said nothing.

Kachiko walked forward, stopping only paces away from her husband. Blood dried darkly on her neck, but she had already reclaimed much of her confident grace. She gestured at the edict.

“As you said, it was the Hantei’s final wish was that you rule until an Emperor can sit upon the throne.”

“As regent.”

“Rokugan’s welfare cannot turn on a title, my lord. The Empire cannot survive if it does not have leadership.” She glanced up at the throne, and then back at Shoju. “As you said, there are no alternatives.”

Shoju looked around the court chamber. It might be the locus of Imperial politics, but those politics happened only to serve the Empire. The plots, schemes, and policies conceived within this court touched the towering Wall of the Crab, desperately fighting an implacable foe made of nightmares...the ravaged lands of the Crane, struggling just to feed their people...the remote mountains of the Dragon, who wrestled with insidious blasphemy even as their children became ever fewer.

He turned and climbed the dais, this time to its topmost level. He imagined Sotorii sitting upon this throne as Kachiko had advocated, pampered to distraction, little more than a *bunraku* puppet, with Shoju himself working the strings. As soon as he’d formed the image



in his mind, though, another appeared—that of Hantei Jodan, his Emperor and friend, who trusted him with an Empire.

What would Jodan have wanted? Shoju could cleanse the stain of regicide from the Hantei line by sending Sotorii off in exile, taking his violent act with him. Yet that would doom his soul forever.

There had been few *Sesshō* in the Empire's history. Those who had been so appointed all sat upon the throne during the course of their regencies, moving aside only when the rightful Emperor had truly ascended. Shoju had resolved not to do so, believing it needlessly presumptuous.

But that had been before the Emperor had been murdered by his own son. Before a spiritual stain had fallen over the Hantei dynasty. Before his own wife had proposed blackmailing the new Emperor into compliance with their wishes.

Before the future he thought he understood had ended, and a new, frightening one had begun. And at that future's center, the Scorpion Clan.

Bayushi Shoju sat upon the Chrysanthemum Throne.

Far below him, Kachiko bowed deeply.

Shoju looked at his hands resting on the great dragons carved into the throne's emerald arms...then immediately stood. "Prince Daisetsu must be found," he insisted, "and brought here before the opening of court."

Kachiko straightened. "Of course, my lord." Did she smile slightly when she bowed again? Her footsteps faded as she withdrew.

I am sure you will find no lack of opponents, both old and new, the Emperor had said.

Of that, your Imperial majesty, he had replied, *I have no doubt.*

Shoju watched Kachiko until she was gone, then turned back to the throne. Extracting the Go stone he had never played from his obi, he placed it on the great seat.

"I have done as you asked, my old friend. I have made my move."

He descended the dais. Although his duty was clear, his soul would never again be free of that touch of polished emerald.



Akodo Toturi dragged himself up a long tunnel of darkness, toward a distant light. The black walls scraped at him—jabbing him with jagged shards of pain—but he pulled himself doggedly along, determined to reach the brightness above. Finally, it widened, a point of light becoming a circle, pushing the dark constriction of the tunnel away—

“Toturi?”

The voice hummed out of the light. He thought he should recognize it, but all that mattered was reaching it, escaping from the confining blackness...

“Toturi...can you hear me?”

Light blossomed all around him as he opened his eyes. It made him wince and blink. A face appeared over him, dimming the light as it opened its mouth. The eyes that met his...

“Kaede?”

He winced again, his voice a raw scratch at the back of his throat.

“Do not attempt to move,” she said. “You have been severely injured. We have tried our best to tend your wounds, but even with the kami aiding in your healing, you must rest.”

Rest. Yes... The tunnel began to close back in—

A streak of pain shot through his center. His wound. A sword. A shinobi.

Over Kaede’s protests, Toturi levered himself to his elbows and looked around, forcing himself to see beyond the dull flares of pain, the aching throb in his head, and assess his situation. He expected to see chaos, the immediate aftermath of battle, but saw, instead, a tidy room, small and nondescript. He looked at Kaede.

“Where are we?”

“Safe, my lord,” a new voice said. Kitsuki Kāgi stepped into view through an open door that revealed another room beyond, simple and domestic, a lantern glowing softly over a steaming tea service. “This is one of several safe-houses we maintain in the city against...well, eventualities such as this one.”

“We brought you here,” Kaede said, “as soon as you could be safely moved.”

Toturi gathered himself and sat upright, wincing and groaning and ignoring Kaede’s renewed objections as he did. Bandages swathed his chest and arm. The wounds beneath them burned, but dully, as though they were many days old. He flexed arms and hands, satisfied that, although weakened, they were still functional.

“Very well,” he said. “Perhaps this is a good time for you to tell me what happened, then.”

Kaede glanced at Kāgi. Toturi’s chief *yoriki* returned a grim nod.

Toturi frowned at his wife. Weakly, he managed, “What? What is going on?”

A pause. He waited.

“About the attack on you, my husband, we know little. We only know that you were nearly

killed, but you survived, despite the best efforts of your attackers.”

“Whoever they were,” Kāgi added. “We have not yet had the opportunity to pursue that particular matter.”

Toturi looked from one to the other as they spoke, stopping with his gaze on the yoriki. They had brought him to a safe house...and had not yet been able to begin investigating an attack on the Emerald Champion. Why?

“Something else has happened,” Toturi whispered. “Tell me.”

It was Kaede who spoke, “The Emperor is dead.”

Toturi just stared at her.

The Emperor was...?

“Reports continue to come back from the Palace,” she went on, “but we know still little of substance. We know only that the Son of Heaven is dead. I...I believe I felt it.” Kaede glanced again at Kāgi, then back to Toturi. “We fear that whoever sought to have you killed may have succeeded in a similar attempt against the Emperor.”

Too slow, my lord Lion. The voice had been familiar, but as he tried to focus his memory, his vision swam and his thoughts spun. He had to plant a hand on the futon to steady himself. It must have been a shinobi, that was certain. But whose?

“Truly, Kaede?”

If it were true, the Emperor, whom he had sworn to protect with his life, was dead. Toturi had failed.

Kaede remained silent and still.

Kāgi slid the door closed, leaving them alone.

For a while, Toturi said nothing. He looked about the room. There was no sign of his *daishō* or the sword of the Emerald Champion. Had they, too, been lost in his folly?

A bleak darkness spilled over him. Since the day his brother, Arasou, had died by Doji Hotaru’s arrow before the gates of Toshi Ranbo, he had made choices that he’d thought were correct, or at least the best he could given the situation. And they had all led here, to this moment of utter failure.



After Arasou's death, Hotaru had written to him. In her letter, she had said, *I know you to be level-headed, wise, and honorable, so I trust that you will take the best course of action.*

"Your thoughts have wandered into dark places, my husband," Kaede said. "Please, do not walk them without me."

"If I walk in darkness, it is because my path has taken me there, Kaede. Yours has not."

She leaned forward, placed her hands on his face and turned his head so he looked into her eyes. "You do not understand, my beloved. Your path *is* my path. Now, more than ever."

...I trust that you will take the best course of action...

Toturi winced as he reached up and gently pulled her hands away. "I am sorry, my wife. I have failed. In my duty to the Empire, to my clan...and to my family. I have failed. Where I must walk now, you cannot follow."

Tears glistened in Kaede's eyes. "No..."

It could be no other way. "We must each do our duty."

"I have already lost my father. I cannot..." She stopped and touched her belly. "We cannot lose you as well."

Toturi ignored his hurts and gathered his wife in his arms. "I'm afraid you already have, my love. But...not yet. Not just yet." He could hold her for just a little while longer.