

# Children of the Empire Part II

By D.G. Laderoute

As he and Dairu entered the dōjō in the Imperial Training Grounds and pulled off their snowy cloaks, Daisetsu could scarcely believe he was even here. Several times he'd tried to get Dairu to listen to reason, but the young Scorpion merely shook his head.

"You were challenged, Daisetsu-sama," he'd replied. "The challenge must be answered." His flat and unshakable certainty only made Daisetsu marvel even more at the absurdity of it all.

It took a moment for Daisetsu's eyes to adjust from Lady Sun's late afternoon brightness to the cavernous gloom of the dōjō. When they finally did, he stopped short. Sotorii was here, standing apart from another group of people gathered near one of the sparring circles marked on the floor. Daisetsu recognized the armored bulk of Seppun honor guards and the crests of several Otomo and Miya courtiers. The Emerald Champion, Doji Satsume, stood with them, his face its usual study in severity. But it was the figure around whom they'd all clustered that drew his immediate attention—his father, the Emperor, was here.

Relief flooded him. Someone had learned of what had happened and informed their father. Finally, this nonsense would be laid to rest. Their father would put a stop to the foolishness between his sons, no doubt admonishing them for carrying on so; embarrassing, but no more embarrassing than this whole unseemly display.

"Daisetsu-san," the Emperor said, "step forward."

Daisetsu obeyed, then bowed, suppressing a sigh as he did. *So, it begins. Hopefully, father will not be too harsh.*

"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 glanced 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 stared at the Emperor. *Unless the Heavens...?*

*Is he going to let this foolishness proceed?*

"Ordinarily, your majesty," Doji Satsume said, "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* must suffice."

Daisetsu's stare edged toward an unconcealed gape. *Father...you can't be serious!*

Regardless, Sotorii and Dairu were both profoundly serious as they each took up a bokken and stepped into the sparring circle. Satsume himself acted as adjudicator, naming the alleged

transgression—an insult, unforgivable in its substance—and beseeching the Heavens to administer justice, guiding the hands of one of the combatants to righteous victory by a blow to his opponent's torso. This was, perhaps, as benign as a duel could possibly be, but it was the fact of it occurring at all that left Daisetsu stunned. He had felt he was upon a runaway horse; now, it had long since reared and thrown him into a persistent dream that clung like cobwebs, both real and unreal at once.



As the Emerald Champion exited the circle, Daisetsu looked at his father. *No. Surely he will stop this. He means only to teach us all a lesson, for pretending to be samurai. He won't allow Sotorii to strike at Dairu...allow him to be humiliated, even hurt, just because my brother is an obstinate fool.*

But the Emperor's solemn attention remained on Dairu and Sotorii, as did that of his retinue. All watched what was about to happen as though it was something momentous, and not just a petty squabble between brothers.

Because he was looking at the Emperor, Daisetsu almost missed it. Dairu and Sotorii were motionless, their bokken held at the ready...then an eruption of war-cries, a blur of movement...a sharp yelp of pain. Sotorii stumbled past Dairu, clutching at his side. Dairu, also in motion, turned, stopped, and faced Sotorii. He waited for the young Hantei to bow his acceptance of defeat, to be followed by an apology—

—and Sotorii did turn and face Dairu, but he offered no bow. Instead, he snarled and swung the bokken at the Scorpion's head. Dairu barely ducked in time, the stout wooden practice sword whistling past his ear.

Dairu immediately backpedaled and raised his own bokken. Sotorii closed in, growling and swinging again and again, hard enough that if any of his wild swipes were to connect, Dairu would certainly suffer severe injury. Gasps and exclamations rose from the Emperor's retinue, but Daisetsu found himself already in motion, his shock and horror at his brother's attack trailing his own body's desire to act. In a few steps he had reached Sotorii and grabbed his arm, pulling it, trying to stop him from swinging again.



“Sotorii...no!”

But Sotorii was stronger and charged with fury. He yanked free, turned, and hefted the bokken.

Daisetsu meant to dodge back, but his balance and momentum were all wrong. He would just stumble, then the bokken would slam down on his exposed head—

Something massive shoved in front of him. Daisetsu saw the intricate lacing of lacquered armor, and realized it was one of the honor guard. He heard Sotorii shout “No!,” but the guard just stood his ground, an impassive wall of determination and armor.

A frozen moment, as Sotorii simply stood, confronting the unyielding Seppun. Daisetsu seized on the reprieve to glance at Dairu. The Scorpion stood in a defensive crouch nearby, a stunned look on his face, but with no apparent injuries otherwise.

The Emperor ended the sudden silence. “Sotorii-san, that is *enough!*”

Sotorii’s eyes leaped from one of the spectators to another...another. Finally, he flung the bokken away and ran from the dōjō, a lone figure quickly lost in Lady Sun’s brilliance beyond the door.

The Emperor finally said, “I believe we are done here,” and left without another word, his retinue trailing behind him. Satsume appeared as impassive as ever, but Daisetsu saw the looks exchanged among the other retainers. None of them would breathe a word of the horrible thing that had transpired here, of course...nor would any of them forget it.

Still gripping the bokken, Dairu stepped beside Daisetsu. “Are you alright, Hantei-sama?”

Daisetsu looked at his friend and gave a tired nod. “Yes. I am fine.” He started to turn away but stopped. “Thank you, Dairu-san, for standing as my champion.”

“I was honored to do, Daisetsu-sama.”

*Of course, you were. And that is why today went so very wrong.*

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### Today

“Of course,” Jodan said, “I can only surmise what transpired between Sotorii, Daisetsu, and your son before they arrived in the dōjō, based on what each of my sons described. Even then, while they agree on the essential facts of the matter, their interpretations of them are quite different.”

Shoju offered a rare laugh. As always, Jodan found it...off-putting. The Scorpion Clan Champion no doubt reserved his laughter for that very effect—yet another social weapon in the Bayushi lord’s formidable arsenal. Certainly it wasn’t intended that way this time.

“That amuses you, Shoju-san?”

“In a way,” Shoju said. “It speaks to the belief that there is only one world, the one we inhabit. But, in reality, there are as many worlds as there are people, each true to them. And then there is one more—that of the objective truth.”

Jodan lifted an eyebrow. "So, no one is able to see the world the way it truly is?"

"If such a person exists, your majesty, they would be...exceptional." Shoju looked into the garden. "Perhaps that is what Enlightenment is—the ability to see the truth in everything. To see what things actually are, rather than what we believe or want them to be."

Jodan found himself shifting uncomfortably at Shoju's words. *What is true? Can we even know? I face these questions every day.* He made his tone as light-hearted as he could, though. "Save your forays into philosophy for a later time, my friend. You are not ready to shave your head and retire into a monastery just yet."

Another laugh from Shoju, but this time, it was quiet and brief. "I suspect that such a quiet retirement is not to be my fate." He looked back from the garden and, once more, shrugged his lopsided shrug. "In any case, philosophy is just that—philosophy. Perhaps the objective truth of things does not really matter. What does is our own, personal truths about the world, as they are the ones we must live with." He gave Jodan a keen look from behind his mask. "Those...and the truths of our superiors which are, of course, more correct. Which means your truths about the world are the most correct of all, your majesty."

Jodan looked at the Go stone again. "There was a time when I believed that," he said. "When I was young and idealistic, I believed that I not only understood the world, I understood it better than anyone else. Such belief is essential, if one is going to lead an Empire." He looked back on Shoju. "I am no longer so certain of that. Age is believed to bring wisdom. It may, but it also brings doubt. If, as you say, my truths are the most correct, and even I begin to doubt them...then is it not right for me to step down from the throne? To have someone upon it who genuinely believes their truths are the correct ones?"

"I have little doubt Sotorii believes that very thing. Yet, you choose to not elevate him in your place."

Jodan sighed. "When I spoke to the Emerald Champion about this, I said that there was a darkness in Sotorii." By Emerald Champion, he meant Akodo Toturi...but that made him think of Toturi's predecessor, Doji Satsume. Satsume always managed to offer advice that somehow managed to incorporate the idealism of Bushidō, while being usefully pragmatic. What would *he* have said to all of this?

*I miss you, Satsume, my old friend.*

Shoju's voice brought him back to the present. "All people were borne from the union of Lady Sun's tears and Lord Moon's blood, your majesty. The latter is the embodiment of darkness and sin, and it exists in all of us."

Jodan waved a hand. "This is different. Sotorii..." He paused, seeking a path forward for his words. He finally settled on what was in his heart...on one of the few truths of which he *did* remain certain. "He worries me, Shoju-san. Ever since he was a young child, I had noted his tendency to be willful, even cruel, but children are often such and, as they mature, leave such unpleasant traits behind."



As he spoke, Jodan recalled Akodo Toturi's words, when he had first told this new Emerald Champion of his intent to abdicate and upend his succession.

"He is young," Toturi had said, "and the young are given to passion, often at the expense of more considered and thoughtful words and deeds. Learning the wisdom to put aside passion is very much part of maturing."

That did not seem to be the case with Sotorii. Whatever his truths were, they seemed as dark as he was.

"It finally became clear in the dōjō," Jodan finally said, "when he dueled your son. None of the things that should have constrained that darkness—whether the part of him that is borne from Lord Moon, or something else entirely—did so. Not Bushidō, not even his own sense of honor."

Jodan no longer saw Shoju, the Go board nor its stones, even the gardens. He saw only Sotorii, after being defeated by Dairu.

*It was so clear. On his face...in his eyes. An intensity to his anger and frustration, like looking into an open forge. It was...hatred. Hatred that fueled, and then unleashed violence. Left unchecked, he would have killed Dairu. Killed him.*

"He is not fit to rule this Empire," Jodan finally said. "If he tries to do so, he will bring nothing but ruin to Rokugan."

Shoju nodded, but said, "He will not take his removal from the succession easily or well."

Jodan tried to dismiss the lingering image of Sotorii in the dōjō. But his son's face, twisted in an almost primal rage, persisted in his mind's eye. And when Daisetsu had grabbed his arm, to intervene and save Dairu, that fury had only deepened.

*He would have killed Daisetsu, too.*

Jodan slowly shook his head. "No, Shoju-san...he will not."

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### *Six Months Ago*

Hantei Sotorii waved aside the Scorpion bushi and strode into the Scorpion Guest House, his Seppun Honor Guard escorts remaining outside. The Scorpion turned as he did, the man's eyes following Sotorii with a confused mix of surprise, shock, deference, and uncertainty. He had no doubt the man had been given strict instructions to disallow anyone from entering who didn't clearly have legitimate business with his clan. But Sotorii was the Crown Prince of Rokugan. He was invited to every place, and his business was always legitimate.

Sotorii passed along the entry hall, into an audience chamber. Servants bustled about, arranging cushions, and laying out a tea service, preparing the room to receive...someone. As he burst in, they all looked up like startled birds, then scattered to the margins of the room, dropping, and pressing their foreheads to the floor. As he shed his snowy cloak and wet sandals, Sotorii pointed at one of them.

"I am looking for my esteemed brother. I have been told he is here. Take me to him."

The servant, a middle-aged man, just stared at the floor. Sotorii gritted his teeth, ready to lash out, but it struck him that the man might simply not know who he was talking about. He was, after all, a mere servant.

"He will be with Bayushi Dairu-san," Sotorii said. "Surely you know who *that* is."

Now, if he keeps up that dumbly insolent stare, then by the honored ancestors I will have him flogged.

However, the servant bowed and started for a door. Sotorii followed. The servant led him along several corridors and through several rooms, all decorated in the reserved and somehow foreboding way of the Scorpion. They finally reached a door where the servant stopped, apparently to request entry. Sotorii snapped, "Out of my way, you fool," and shoved past him, sliding open the door and pushing into the room.

Scrolls...racks and racks of them. A library. Sotorii carried on, the servant now scurrying along behind him, passing among the racks and through the dusty smell of old paper, stopping at the sight of Daisetsu and Dairu kneeling at a table piled with yet more scrolls. They turned as he entered—

*Their looks are scornful. Contemptuous, even.*

Sotorii made himself ignore it. "I had thought, brother, that you were to practice your calligraphy today."

Daisetsu gave a dismissive shrug. "I did, brother. And now that is done, and I am here."

*But...I wanted us to practice together. I need you to help me with the ensō, the circle of Enlightenment, which you draw so much better than I do...*

Sotorii pushed that thought away, too. It no longer mattered, because here Daisetsu was, doing...

He took in the piled scrolls on the table. "Here doing what, exactly?"

Daisetsu impassively placed his hands on his knees, but otherwise ignored his brother.

*You just want me to go away, don't you?*

Dairu waved away the servant. "Hantei-sama, 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 will be the victor."

Despite himself, Sotorii was intrigued. "Why? What is the point?"

Dairu said, "The point is to..." and then trailed off, looking at Daisetsu in a way that said, *He isn't very smart, is he?*

Daisetsu sighed. "The point is to simply challenge each other, and ourselves at the same time." It *did* sound interesting. He nodded. "Fine. I will take part as well."

Daisetsu said nothing and just stared at the scrolls before him. He may have sighed again. Something inside Sotorii began to crumple. *You don't want me to participate, do you? Why not?*

Dairu finally broke the silence. "Very well, Hantei-sama," he said with a resigned weariness. "The contest is quite simple. We—"

"No," Daisetsu said.

Sotorii looked at his brother, who now looked back with an impatient contempt hardening his eyes.

"No," Daisetsu said again. "We can hold another contest, at another time. This one is between Dairu-san and me and is nearly done."

That something crumpled even more. He was, indeed, being rejected.

Again.

*Is it because I am to be Emperor someday? Is that why you resent me and want nothing to do with me? But that is...unfair. Even an Emperor needs friends!*

Sotorii had stepped closer to the table without even realizing it. It would be so easy for him to join them in their contest. He could sit down, and choose a book, and...

But they didn't want him to. They just wanted him to go away.

"You can hold another contest now," he said, hoping he didn't sound like he was pleading. "Just start this one over again."

*Please.*

But Daisetsu shook his head. "No."

Anger began leaking from that crumpled something, hot, dark tendrils of it that tightened his muscles, made his heart pound, his breath rasp in his chest.

*Why won't you ever let me be part of anything...?*

Words abruptly bubbled up Sotorii's throat, flung themselves from his mouth. "How dare you refuse me! I demand—"

"I do not care *what* you demand!" Daisetsu snarled, 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 gave up trying to hold back his hurtful anger. "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 looked at Dairu. "Isn't that right, Dairu-san?"

*Please, Dairu...you understand...don't you?*

The young Scorpion looked up from the table. "Of course, Hantei-sama. Your presence here is...is indeed an honor." As soon as he'd finished speaking, Dairu's eyes flicked away again; but not so quickly that Sotorii couldn't see the impatience in them, the desire for him to just be gone.

Daisetsu shared a look with Dairu that said everything that needed to be said. Then he turned back to Sotorii, his expression now just exasperated disdain.

"Dairu-san says only what he thinks you wish to hear. 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."

The words struck like a blow, and fury pooled in the wound. Everything around him seemed to go deathly still.

*Fine. If this is how it shall be...*

"You have gone too far, brother," he 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 sniffed. "Do not be ridiculous, brother. I am not going to *duel* you."

*So, you would deny me even that? The opportunity to redress this wrong? Do you really hate me so much, brother?*

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

Daisetsu...smirked. He even seemed about to laugh. He turned, as though to share his laughter with Dairu.

But Dairu spoke first, his voice flat. "I agree that you are an honored guest, Hantei Sotorii-sama, but your behavior has been...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 will I stand as his champion in this matter."

Daisetsu glanced at the Scorpion. "Dairu-san, no...this is not necessary!"

"Yes, Hantei-sama," Dairu replied, "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."

Sotorii swallowed and blinked. Dairu had made his loyalty painfully clear. But crying about it, whether out of frustration, misery, or some mix of the two would be the epitome of humiliation. So, he focused on his anger, instead, using it as a sort of armor against this...betrayal. Because that's what it was. It was betrayal.

"Fine. If you wish for the Heavens to judge you as well, Dairu-san," he said, "so be it."

Sotorii found brief satisfaction in the way his brother's expression finally changed from bemused contempt to one of worry and doubt. He wondered if Daisetsu might now back down, changing his mind and inviting Sotorii to be part of their contest after all.



*It is too late for that.*

“Very well then,” Sotorii said. “I shall meet you at the dōjō in the Imperial Training Grounds in one hour.”

Before either of them could say anything else, he offered a perfunctory bow, turned his back on them and left.

An older man bearing a Shosuro *mon* on his kimono intercepted him on his way out. Sotorii recognized him as Bayushi Kachiko’s chief retainer...he thought his name might be Takeru. As the Shosuro bowed, he said, “A thousand pardons, Hantei-sama. I was just informed you were here—”

Sotorii just waved the man away and continued into the Forbidden City, his Seppun escorts falling in behind him. Finally, he reached a remote but familiar place in the Imperial Gardens, a place where he often sat alone. He waved off the Seppun, leaving them to stand a discreet distance away.

He didn’t want them, or anyone else, to see him finally cry.

