

Challenge, Focus, Strike!

Adventure Hooks for Legend of the Five Rings

VOLUME I: CFS OF THE WEEK #1 THROUGH #13

Written by Isawa Nazomitsu (Scott Stockton) • Compiled & Edited by Pirate Spice (Sean C. Riley)

Foreword

When I first joined Alderac Entertainment Group's gaming forum (www.alderac.com/forum), I was delighted to discover the L5R RPG GMs section rife with plot hooks and adventure ideas in the classic "Challenge, Focus, Strike" (CFS) format. Though many were excellent, one author's submissions stood out as an example for all others to strive for. Isawa Nazomitsu's "CFS of the Week" feature has been a source of inspiration and joy for many a Game Master, myself included.

Following is the first volume of a series of documents collecting the esteemed Nazomitsu's brilliant weekly installments. *Challenge, Focus, Strike!* is just my way of thanking him for sharing his enlightened creativity with us, and making his excellent work more readily available to the L5R community.

For the sake of further organizing these, I have attempted to give each hook a title (also taking inspiration from suggestions on the forum). The hooks themselves are presented in the order that they were originally posted, edited for brevity and typography.

It is my deepest honor to open *Challenge, Focus, Strike! – Volume I* with an exclusive "CFS of the Week #Alpha," written by Nazomitsu specifically for this release.

– Sean C. Riley (a.k.a. Pirate Spice)

A Simple Errand

This one is dedicated to Pirate Spice for the fantastic job he did in archiving, laying out, and presenting my numerous adventure hooks. And also to all the GMs who put their blood, sweat, and tears into creating memorable adventures for their players.

This scenario can be used to provide an overarching story for a campaign, giving the party a reason to work together, and directing them as they travel toward further adventures.

Enjoy!

– Scott Stockton (a.k.a. Isawa Nazomitsu)

CHALLENGE

The player characters are asked or assigned to help a group of monks maintain a library. The library is well-known as a popular refuge for retired samurai of station who wish to escape the demands of their former lives, and just about every clan has at least one daimyo who supports the library. As such, the player characters are excused from their normal duties until the maintenance is completed.

That shouldn't be any cause for worry, however, as their part in the project is bound to be no more than just a simple errand.

FOCUS

The head archivist is a retired samurai who has taken the name Rai Li. He meets the player characters warmly and takes them to his office, where a series of scrolls are laid out on a writing table. The scrolls tell of the heroic deeds of a number of Rokugan's lesser known heroes, and are part of a larger historical account. Rai Li tells the PCs that a Phoenix historian donated the set of fifty-two scrolls to the temple so that the Empire might know of the great deeds that brave men and women perform every day. He goes on to explain that a copy of each scroll was also given to the hero or heroes whose stories were detailed in that particular volume. While this fact would normally be no more significant than an archival footnote, recent developments have made these copies especially important. It turns out that a number of the original scrolls suffered water damage during a severe storm last year and are no longer readable. Thus, without the copies of the missing scrolls, the set is incomplete.

Naturally, Rai Li would like the PCs to gather the scrolls. He would do it himself, but other duties are keeping him busy. And, after all, a group of samurai should have no difficulty performing the job of a simple librarian.

STRIKE

The missing volumes are scattered all across the Empire, and while Rai Li has records that can tell the PCs where to start looking, it will take some time and effort to track them down. Some have been incorporated into other libraries, either out of carelessness or for safekeeping. Some are being kept as family treasures. Some are stored in dusty warehouses. One was given to a geisha as a present a few years ago, and another was stored in the Kitsu Tombs with the ashes of an honored soldier. One has been lost in a haunted cave, and two were in a box that was stolen by bandits. A ronin duelist uses one as a means of proving his samurai heritage, and one more is being kept by a shugenja who has since gone insane.

Still, all the PCs have to do is gather a few scrolls and bring them back to the library. No trouble at all, right?

1. A Measure of Worth

Today's adventure idea has two versions, depending on how nice or naughty you want to be to your players.

CHALLENGE

A mysterious monk passes through the area, causing quite a commotion. The monk claims to be seeking "the worthiest soul in the region" to bestow a great reward on that man or woman.

FOCUS

VERSION 1

Naturally, everyone who hears of the monk's quest will have a different idea of what exactly constitutes worthiness. Humble men will clamor to nominate and support those they respect. Proud men will step forward to declare (or show) why they are worthy. And wicked men will take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that they are found worthy somehow. After all, if you can take something, are you not worthy of having it?

VERSION 2

Naturally, everyone who hears of the monk's quest will have a different idea of what exactly constitutes worthiness. A number of impromptu competitions break out as individuals seek to show off their strength, intellect, prowess, and virtue. The characters are free to participate if they wish, or they can simply deal with the problems that arise from the charged atmosphere. The monk keeps track of everyone who comes forward, but pays particular attention to those who act with honor.

STRIKE

VERSION 1

When the monk's reward is finally revealed, he announces to all present that the recipient is the worthiest soul in the region to receive the wisdom of Shinsei and the blessings of the fortunes in the coming months. He calls upon everyone to recognize the incredible potential that the winner holds, and lauds the lucky man or woman with praise and promises of good fortune. Once the winner receives his or her public recognition the monk is satisfied and says no more, other than encouraging others to "wait and see."

VERSION 2

The monk is actually a Bloodspeaker initiate searching for a suitable victim for ritual sacrifice. If the PCs do not stop his plans he will kill the "winner" of the contest and summon a swarm of vengeful yokai to torment the innocent. Naturally, the PCs will have some qualms about this idea if one of them is chosen as the lucky winner.

There you go. Two ways to get your characters involved in a variety of fun and interesting situations, with rewards that are definitely more than they bargained for.

2. Much Ado About Nothing

Today I give you a mystery scenario with a twist.

CHALLENGE

A sudden storm forces the player characters to take refuge for the night at a roadside inn. A handful of other travelers hailing from different clans and families are also stuck in the small building, which offers just enough room for privacy.

FOCUS

Dinner is served in the common room, and it is apparent that not all of the travelers in the inn consider each other worthy of courtesy and respect. One samurai in particular, Matsu Ryosuke (feel free to change the family name as you see fit), is quite outspoken and abrasive.

After dinner ends the travelers retire to various rooms around the inn to get away from one another and relax in private.

Thirty minutes later Ryosuke is found stabbed to death in the outhouse. All signs point to one of the other people staying in the inn as the culprit.

STRIKE

Ryosuke is actually a Ninja Shapeshifter. It is not "dead," but is merely appearing so in an attempt to sow paranoia in the other people staying at the inn. Rather than drop its disguise or take action against anyone else, it will let suspicions build among the remaining travelers. It hopes that distrust and wild accusations will eventually cause one or more of the residents to draw steel against another.

Remember that using the Commune spell on a dead body is considered Maho. If you want to be especially sneaky you can rule that any other elemental kami in the area reply with "I saw Nothing" when questioned.

If you really want to spice up the scenario, try taking players aside for private conversations or passing out secret notes to build paranoia in the group too. It doesn't work with everyone, but it can be an interesting role-playing challenge for groups who come from different clans and backgrounds.

3. The Price of Blasphemy

This week we find ourselves with a ronin, a problem, and a small fortune, but not necessarily in that order.

CHALLENGE

A young ronin shugenja approaches the party while they are relaxing and introduces himself as Kintaro. He explains that he is searching for knowledge and requests a chance to buy or copy any spell scrolls the party might be carrying. While this is an extremely unorthodox proposition, Kintaro is willing to pay any amount of money, and has more than enough to tempt unscrupulous samurai.

FOCUS

If no one in the party accepts the money Kintaro offers he becomes desperate and reveals the details of his problem (listed in the Strike section below), begging the characters to help him.

If anyone in the party does provide Kintaro with spell scrolls in exchange for money, he thanks them profusely and pays the agreed upon amount. From that moment onward, the shugenja who accepted Kintaro's money is afflicted by the same curse that Kintaro suffers (see below), although it may take some time before he or she notices.

STRIKE

Kintaro gained his wealth by stealing several valuable treasures from a shrine dedicated to the elemental kami. The kami struck back by placing a curse on Kintaro and any who share magical resources with him. Any spell scrolls carried by such a shugenja are good for only a single use, and become blank after used to cast a spell.

Whether Kintaro explains his problem to the party willingly, or they have to find the truth another way, the shrine's treasures must be completely restored and reparations made before the curse may be lifted (at which time all blank scrolls are restored to normal). Although Kintaro knows the depths of his misdeeds, he is afraid to face the kami's wrath, and would much rather continue running from his mistakes than go back to the shrine.

If you think your party might be overly reluctant to trade in magical scrolls, you can change Kintaro into a young woman named Kaneko. Players might be more inclined to help a woman who is down on her luck, and a sweet girl's smile goes a long way toward convincing player characters to give aid.

4. Behind Closed Doors

Since this is the fourth installment in this series, and the number four means death in Japanese, here's a little something to get under your players' skin. Be warned: don't read it while you eat.

CHALLENGE

The characters are invited to the home of an influential and respected nobleman in a small town famous for its natural beauty. The noble offers the party a chance to relax in his "little paradise."

FOCUS

After a few days in the estate it becomes clear that something is wrong in paradise. No one smiles or laughs, and the few servants visible in the house take pains to go about their duties as quietly as possible. A pall hangs over not only the noble's home, but the entire town as well. Colors are muted, and emotions subdued. No matter how hard the characters search, they will find nothing of beauty here.

STRIKE

The noble is insane, and has a torture chamber hidden in a secret room beneath his estate. He not only performs physical torture on the people of his village, but abuses them in other unspeakable ways. For example, feeding on their remains and forcing their loved ones to do so as well. His impure actions have brought a blight on the town, but his authority and status make him all but politically untouchable. The characters must decide what they will do in the face of such heinous atrocities.

5. All Fools' Day

April Fools' Day is almost upon us, and while this holiday is not celebrated in Rokugan (or is celebrated every day, depending on your players) it still provides an excellent excuse to run scenarios that are just a little (or quite a bit) silly.

CHALLENGE

The characters are invited to a dinner party at the home of a local noble. A number of important personages are also invited, including any NPCs that have strong relationships with the characters. The host has gathered a number of delicacies for the occasion, and promises an event that none will ever forget.

FOCUS

The party begins without incident, but just before the second toast (to be made with a fruity type of alcohol from the Mantis Isles) is served the characters are called away by their servants. It seems that a trio of mujina are ransacking the party's gear, and something must be done to minimize the damage. Unless the PCs insist on getting a drink first, this bothersome interruption will likely prevent them from enjoying the wine.

STRIKE

This is only the start of the party's problems. The mujina also drank all of the fruit wine before the start of the feast, and replaced it with a brew from their native realm of Sakkaku. Anyone who drinks the wine is automatically influenced by chame for the rest of the evening. Chame (described on pages 44 and 45 of *Fortunes and Winds*) causes victims to act in a foolish and unrestrained manner, as if intoxicated. Depending on the individuals affected and the mood the GM wishes to present, the results could range from hilarious to deadly serious.

If things get too out of hand, you can always rule that everyone affected remembers nothing come morning and let the PCs intimidate the servants into keeping quiet. After all, seppuku kind of takes the fun out of April Fools Day. Or you could let the repercussions, whatever they may be, linger for some time to come.

6. As Driven Snow

Here in Osaka the weather is getting better and better every day, and the cherry blossoms are just starting to bloom. Soon the flower viewing parties will start. Of course, not everyone is lucky enough to live in an area with cherry blossoms, so here's a little something to enjoy instead of the real thing.

CHALLENGE

A young poet who is on good terms with the player characters asks for a favor. He explains that he met a young temple maiden who befriended and inspired him during a trip to the Isawa Woodlands in his youth. He will hold his first cherry blossom viewing party soon, and he wishes for his dear friend to attend. He asks the party to deliver his invitation to the temple where she lives, and also to convince her to attend if she is reluctant.

FOCUS

The maiden attends a temple in the mountains in the northern reaches of the Phoenix lands, where winter is still in full force. As the player characters go further, the weather grows colder and the snows become deeper. Although travel is possible, it becomes difficult to advance, and it takes a few days before the temple can be found in the coldest, snowiest reaches of the forest.

STRIKE

The maiden remembers the poet fondly and would like to accept his invitation, for she has never seen cherry blossoms in bloom. There is however, one problem. She is a Yuki no Onna, and snow follows in her wake no matter where she goes. She believes that the Isawa Libraries might hold an answer, but there is no way she could enter without causing an indoor blizzard. If the player characters could find a solution on her behalf, however...

The key to bringing the Snow Maiden to the festival without freezing the flowers could be a secret spell, difficult ritual, lost artifact, or plea for divine intervention, depending on your preferences. Remember to make sure the players are aware that there is a time limit. Like too many things in this world, the cherry blossoms bloom for but a short time before they wither and fall.

7. Garden Pests

This week's adventure idea continues the cherry blossom theme from last week and is based on an actual Japanese legend. I hope you enjoy both the adventure and the story.

CHALLENGE

An important lord is troubled by the sad state of his garden. His beloved cherry trees have become withered and barren, and refuse to blossom. He has heard tales of an old man who can restore sick trees to health called 'Hana-Saka-Jiji,' and he offers a reward to anyone who can bring the miracle worker to him.

FOCUS

Although the old man's talent with flowers and trees is legendary, he is not an easy man to track down. He roams the land, going wherever his fancy takes him. The last reports of his whereabouts place him near the holdings of the Sparrow Clan, but he has continued his wanderings since then.

In addition, other ambitious groups of samurai and courtiers are also seeking Hana-Saka-Jiji. While these rivals pose no mortal threat to the party, they are not above stooping to sabotage in their attempts to gain the lord's blessing for themselves.

STRIKE

When Hana-Saka-Jiji is brought to the lord's garden, he scatters ashes over the cherry trees...revealing a flock of invisible monsters! The creatures have been draining the life energy of the trees, causing them to become sick and wasted. Once they are revealed they can be dispatched by normal means, but care must be taken to avoid harming the lord's precious trees.

Use whatever statistics you feel appropriate for the monsters. If your characters are still rather inexperienced, flying goblins will probably be enough to pose a challenge. For more powerful parties you can use anything up to minor oni with health draining attacks.

8. Good Help is Hard To Find

This week we move away from cherry blossoms and focus on another aspect of spring in Japan. This season sees numerous students entering school, as well as many young adults entering the work force and seeking jobs. On one hand, the influx of new blood is welcome, but at the same time many employers bemoan their new hires' lack of skill.

CHALLENGE

One of the characters' superiors retains the services of a new advisor. The man, named Baramucha, comes from another family in the supervisor's clan, and confidently assures everyone that he will bring great knowledge and skill to the job.

FOCUS

As time goes on, Baramucha's advice continually proves to be incorrect. He loses track of important details, confuses different facts, and mixes truth with nonsense until the result is impossible to understand. He maintains complete faith in his methods, and changes the subject whenever his mistakes are mentioned. The only useful skill he displays is duping the unwary into believing him. To make matters worse, he has sufficient status and glory to make questioning him publicly difficult.

STRIKE

If the players choose to look into Baramucha's background, they'll find he is completely clean. He has no hidden agenda or skeletons in his closet. He is a loyal and well-meaning, if unintelligent and misguided, member of the clan who gained his position through favors and luck. Nonetheless, if he is left unchecked, he could cause considerable damage.

The exact area under Baramucha's command depends on the tone you want to set for the adventure. If you want things to be serious, you can make him the master of the family's army. If you want a more humorous touch, he can be placed in charge of organizing the household. If you feel really like being really evil toward your players, make Baramucha their new boss.

9. When the Student is Ready...

My apologies for being late this week. Several of my students had last minute projects to complete and needed my advice. (And then I couldn't log on to the forum.) So to make up for the delay I bring you another scenario with multiple versions. Now your players can know the joys that come with being a teacher.

CHALLENGE

One or more of the characters are asked to train and instruct a young bushi named Shinichiro. The young man has just completed his gempukku ceremony, and his sensei would like him to receive some practical guidance from experienced samurai.

FOCUS

Shinichiro is quite talented in combat techniques, and already has a good deal of expertise with the sword. He is an apt pupil and is eager to learn from the player characters.

STRIKE

Choose one of the following:

VERSION 1

Shinichiro has a great deal of confidence in his own abilities, and lacks the patience for prolonged training. He insists on progressively intense training sessions, eventually challenging one or more of his teachers to combat with live weapons. Claiming that he has the control needed both to protect himself and avoid inflicting a serious injury on his training partner, Shinichiro will not be satisfied until he has had the chance to prove his skill.

If you decide to go this route, feel free to give Shinichiro some skill in subtly deriding and insulting the skills of those who refuse to face him.

VERSION 2

Shinichiro is eager to test the skills and maneuvers he has learned in real combat situations. He takes every possible opportunity to look for a fight, and does his best to put the player characters and himself in situations where combat seems likely. His confidence in himself and the party is so great that he desires a chance to show the whole Empire what they can do, and he does not hesitate to proclaim that they can defeat any challenges.

Having connections of his own to call upon and not being completely subject to the commands of the party could greatly aid Shinichiro in his efforts to get the party involved in some daring mission.

VERSION 3

Shinichiro is not really a young bushi, but is actually a Shosuro actor who has taken the young man's place. His assignment is to learn the weaknesses of the player characters' schools, and he does his best to find any flaws in their styles that he can exploit at a later time.

If you desire, you can have the character come back at a later time as an antagonist, with multiple ranks in the Know the School skill.

VERSION 4

Shinichiro is a tormented man. Although he has great skill with the sword and is eager to achieve perfection in his art, he does not wish to be party to any violence or bloodshed. During practice his swordsmanship is flawless, but in real combat he does his best to hide or flee without being noticed.

To further add to Shinichiro's torment, you can provide him with the foretelling of a Great Destiny which requires him to defeat a great enemy.

Of course, if the party manages to give Shinichiro what he wants and teach him something valuable in the process...well, then they are great teachers indeed.

By the way, feel free to post your own ideas for possible twists on Shinichiro's story. After all, every student (and every gaming group) has special needs.

Editor's Note: *Following are the other ideas that were posted.*

VERSION 5 (BY AKODO AKIRA)

Shinichiro is a complete waste of time. Whenever he can he drinks and whores around (yes, he visits brothels rather than geisha house, though he goes there too), he skips out on practice (thinking himself to be good enough), and ignores the samurai in charge (his position is really quite high, or rather his father's position is high). How do the PCs deal with him? Do they disrespect him and possibly earn the father's ire? Do they do only what they are told? Or do they rise to the occasion and turn the young man around into something better than he was?

VERSION 6 (BY BAYUSHI BAKA88)

Regarding [Version 4], I feel as if it would be a good plot to go with whilst the party is traveling with Shinichiro. That way, the revelation of his true combat skills will be more of a shock and a great burden to the PCs. Shinichiro could, of course, eventually conquer his fear (Great Destiny) and end up saving the PCs in some manner.

10. A Devilish Debt

Things have been kind of quiet lately, so let's see what a sudden monster attack can do to shake things up.

CHALLENGE

A relatively weak minor oni of an unknown type emerges from the wilderness to attack the home of the characters' lord or commanding officer. Although the oni is not a serious threat, the attack is focused, sudden, and ruthless.

FOCUS

If the minor oni is defeated another new type of minor oni appears a few days later, attacking with the same goal in mind. Another minor oni comes forth three or four days after that. And another new oni arrives three days after that. None of the oni have been seen before, and they all seek the destruction of the lord's home.

STRIKE

Last winter, the inhabitants of a nearby village were on the brink of starvation when a mysterious shugenja arrived bearing enough rice to last the village through the season. The villagers owe their lives to the shugenja, and he has been calling upon that debt to bind their names to oni. If the characters do not find and eliminate the shugenja, both the lord and the villagers under his protection will suffer.

The shugenja's motives and abilities are up to you. If the party requires more of a challenge, you can have the villagers be willing compatriots of the shugenja, or increase the power of the summoned oni. If the repeated oni attacks are too difficult for the party, you can increase the amount of recovery time in-between attacks or even have the NPC who is being victimized loan the characters some of his prized crystal weaponry for the duration of the threat.

11. Footsteps of My Forebears

A samurai never stands alone. The souls of his ancestors stand beside him at all times. Or at least, they're supposed to...

CHALLENGE

After being struck by a strange nemuranai or spell, one of the characters finds himself unable to receive aid or guidance from one of his heroic ancestors. Ideally, the ancestor in question should be one who has taken a personal interest in the character on previous occasions.

FOCUS

If a Kitsu Sodan-Senzo or another expert on spirits is consulted, the character is told that he must retrace the path of his ancestor's most famous adventure. By performing the same tasks and undergoing the same hardships in the same places that his ancestor did, the character may enter an emotional state that makes it easy for his ancestor to rekindle the connection between them.

STRIKE

The spirit of the ancestor's rival has also learned of the accident, and has sent his descendant to harry the character. If the rival's plan is successful, the character's ancestor may be cut off from the mortal world forever.

Of course, you can tailor the tale of the ancestor's adventure to include whatever situations and problems you wish. Although the character in question does not receive any guidance from the banished ancestor, if the two are similar in personality and temperament you may allow him to gain some small benefits as the adventure progresses.

This idea could also be used to begin a campaign. In order to complete the same quest his ancestor did, the character must secure aid from the descendants of his ancestor's allies - the other player characters. The party must then undertake the same epic quest that their honored ancestors did so long ago.

12. The Tomb of Takeda Fujimu

You can't please everyone all the time this week. In fact, you'll be lucky if you can keep from making everybody angry.

CHALLENGE

While traveling through an unused area of woodland, the characters find the lost tomb of Takeda Fujimu, a famous ronin duelist who was granted a family name by the Emperor hundreds of years ago.

FOCUS

The Takeda family is no longer surviving, but many others lay claim to the hero's tomb. The area is currently under the control of the Scorpion Clan, but at the time the tomb was built the land belonged to the Lion. Furthermore, Fujimu was a member of the Dragon Clan before he was made ronin, and he accepted a number of gifts from the Mirumoto when they attempted to convince him to return to the family.

STRIKE

When a member of the Otomo family arrives to mediate the conflict, she insists that the characters assist her, claiming that the party was chosen by the spirit of Takeda Fujimu when they found the tomb. The characters could suggest that the tomb be given to any of the claimants, held in trust by another family, or even claim it for themselves. Whatever they do, many influential people will try to influence them, and many powerful figures may be angered by their final decision.

If you want to get really wild, you can add more groups who desire stewardship of the tomb. Perhaps the tomb was built by the Kaiu family, and is still listed as part of their holdings. Or the Crane could have brokered a secret deal to offer Fujimu fealty before his untimely death prevented them from announcing it. Monks or the Phoenix could claim the site as sacred. And don't forget the possibility of a ronin claiming (either truthfully or otherwise) to be the lost heir to the Takeda family name.

13. Do You Have an Appointment?

CHALLENGE

The characters are sent to deliver a personal message to the Otomo daimyo on behalf of their superior, who asks that it be given in person and in private. The daimyo is currently attending to political matters at his estate, which is as large as it is busy.

FOCUS

Once they reach the daimyo's home, the characters must deal with several levels of bureaucracy in order to secure an appointment with him. The gatekeeper of the estate, the captain of the guards, the manager of the household, and several assistants bar the way, each demanding proof of the characters' identity and business with the daimyo. The daimyo's personal assistant in particular is quite difficult to deal with, telling the party to "wait for an opening" time after time.

STRIKE

The assistant in question does not bear the party any ill-will or genuinely seek to block their progress. He simply has a different sense of priorities, and is trying to manage the daimyo's time as efficiently as possible. Because new developments in the court demand the daimyo's attention every day, the players will have to convince the assistant that their business is important enough to be guaranteed a spot on the daimyo's schedule. How they do this is up to them, but their actions will certainly have an effect on how they and the message they bear are received.

This adventure has the potential to be particularly difficult for characters with low social standing, while characters with high levels of status and/or glory may get by some obstacles simply by pulling rank. It also provides an excellent opportunity to show martially oriented characters the ways of the courts and the value of social skills.

Challenge, Focus, Strike!

Adventure Hooks for Legend of the Five Rings

VOLUME II: CFS OF THE WEEK #14 THROUGH #26

Written by Jsawa Nazomitsu (Scott Stockton) • Compiled & Edited by Pirate Spice (Sean C. Riley)

Foreword

Following is the second volume of a series of documents collecting the esteemed Isawa Nazomitsu's "CFS of the Week" feature in the L5R RPG GMs section of AEG's gaming forum (www.alderac.com/forum).

For the sake of further organizing these, I have attempted to give each hook a title (also taking inspiration from suggestions on the forum). The hooks themselves are presented in the order that they were originally posted, edited for brevity and typography.

– Sean C. Riley (a.k.a. Pirate Spice)

14. Letters of Intrigue

We have a story of intrigue this week. Intrigue and mayhem, and even some violence.

CHALLENGE

The characters find the bodies of two samurai from rival clans dead in an alley. Even without the skills of a Kitsuki it is apparent that the two men killed each other, as they both hold bloodstained weapons and have been severely wounded in a struggle. On the ground near the bodies lies a traveling pack, which has been torn open, revealing a disguise kit and several scrolls, including a letter.

FOCUS

My Lord,

My mission has been a success. I have discovered the spies in our midst and learned the identities of two of them.

Furthermore, I have learned that they will meet with a hired assassin in the Green Plum Teahouse on the night of the Full Moon.

Be wary, my lord. Enemies are everywhere.

I will attempt to locate their safe house within the city and report to you when I know more about their plans.

*Ever at your service,
Your Humble Servant*

STRIKE

It is not possible to tell which of the dead men wrote the message, as it bears no names or mon. Noble emissaries from both clans are present in the city, as well as samurai, courtiers, and merchants. Any one of them could be a conspirator, or a target, in this plot. The characters must decide who they will tell, if anyone, and depending on which clan sent the spies and which clan uncovered them, the characters could end up thwarting or aiding dark plans.

I always decide which clan the spy was from and which clan the spy hunter was from before the characters do anything, but you can also choose to leave such details undecided until the players choose which noble they will give the message to.

If the characters do nothing or turn the scroll over to some higher authority, feel free to have them jumped by thugs the next night. Hired by the second spy, the mercenaries demand to know where the message is, and will not be convinced by simple claims of ignorance on the part of the characters. The spy's planned long and hard for this chance, and he's not about to let some loose end samurai screw things up.

ALTERNATE VERSION

Instead of finding two dead men with a warning message of unknown origin, the PCs find two groups of dead men at a battle site next to an overturned wagon. Inside the wagon is an ornate sword, and a letter to the daimyo of one of the two groups.

My Lord,

We have reclaimed the blade from the thieves who stole it. Luckily, they were not aware of its true nature, so we were able to wrest it from their grasp with little trouble.

However, I fear that others of their ilk will soon be coming after us. I do not know when I will be able to send you this message, but I intend to follow the route we discussed until I am able to contact you.

I promise you I will do everything in my power to keep the blade away from our enemies and prevent their vile plans from reaching fruition.

*Ever at your service,
Your Humble Servant*

From there on out the scenario is just like the one above, but instead of having a secret message to deliver/protect, the PCs have a mysterious sword of unknown power. A stolen mysterious sword that belongs to someone else. Plus they will have to deal with the possibility that both clans involved will be willing to go to extreme lengths to get the sword for themselves.

15. Civil Blood Makes Civil Hands Unclean

Life is easy when you're a follower; your enemies are whoever your leader says they are. For a samurai hero, however, choices are not so simple.

CHALLENGE

A magistrate arrives in the area, searching for a group of bloodspeakers that is rumored to be active in the region. Although his intense scrutiny and probing questions are off putting to many, refusing to cooperate in his investigation is tantamount to treason.

FOCUS

After a few days of invading everyone's privacy, the magistrate settles on a likely suspect: a rival of one of the PCs. Two days later, he uncovers evidence and makes a formal accusation, using his authority to command the local magistrates to take the suspect into custody.

STRIKE

The "magistrate" is actually a bloodspeaker collaborator seeking to remove several figures who have caused his cult trouble in the past. If no one steps forward to defend the accused or check the veracity of the magistrate's claims, the rival is executed (dishonorably, of course), and the magistrate continues to search for "other bloodspeaker agents."

Given enough time and success in "rooting out bloodspeaker influences," the magistrate may declare the entire area at risk and call in "assistants" to help him. Of course, by that time he may already have started investigating the player characters...

Of course, a number of CFS scenarios end with a twist ending, so your players may be suspicious of the magistrate from the start. If that happens, feel free to have the accused be an actual bloodspeaker. With lots of friends who are willing to help him escape. And a variety of new abilities to use on those who have wronged him.

16. Tides of Chaos

The weather's getting hotter and hotter here in Osaka, and people have started flocking to the beaches. Wouldn't your gaming group like to take a relaxing trip to the seaside as well?

CHALLENGE

A section of ocean that is normally calm and well-traveled suddenly becomes dangerous. Shifting tides, freak giant waves, waterspouts, and whirlpools appear without warning. Tales of sea monsters also begin to circulate, and more than a few ships suffer heavy damage...or worse.

FOCUS

The cause for this drastic change can be found through either divination or old fashioned investigation. About one week before the area became dangerous to enter, a tainted artifact was lost at that location. Legends say that the artifact's corruption can influence its very surroundings, and is only held in check by the light of the sun.

STRIKE

Unless the artifact can be recovered the problem will only grow worse, with the area of effect slowly expanding and the horrors within growing stronger and stronger. Not only will a recovery mission have to deal with the effects of the artifact, but the strange and alien depths of the ocean must be taken into account as well.

The ocean is a strange and dangerous place, and the influence of the Shadowlands can make it even more so. Don't hesitate to use whatever strange creatures or encounters you can come up with.

Naga or Mantis Clan characters would have a personal stake in this adventure, but just about every clan depends on the ocean in one way or another—a fact the characters' daimyo can impress upon them if they are hesitant to go.

Editor's Note: *As was discussed on the forum, there is also a great possibility for a dangerous aftermath to this plot, as potentially tainted seafood could already be making its way to kitchens and markets around Rokugan!*

17. Love and Marriage

Editor's Note: *This CFS was inspired by Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew."*

CHALLENGE

After a long period of negotiations, two families from different clans have agreed to an important trade agreement. In order to cement the bargain, a cross-clan wedding is arranged. The prospective groom is Shiba Toshihisa, a young village administrator who is looking forward to settling down with a beautiful Crane wife. The bride to be is Doji Mizuho, a friend of the PCs.

FOCUS

Mizuho is already deeply in love with a poet from the Kakita family. However, the wedding must proceed as planned in order for the two families to finalize their transaction. The only other eligible member of Mizuho's family is her elder sister, Hikaru. However, Hikaru has set aside her family name to embark on a musha shugyo pilgrimage, and she has not returned home for two whole years.

STRIKE

Hikaru is safe and sound, although it may take some time for the party to track her down. She is currently enjoying the care-free life of a ronin and perfecting her swordsmanship. It will take a good deal of effort to convince her to return to her former responsibilities, and even more to persuade her to marry a man she has never met. If she did agree to return and marry Toshihisa it would mean that Mizuho would be free to pursue her own love, but it would also mean the end of her independent lifestyle.

A possible complication lies in the differing personalities of Toshihisa and Hikaru. Can Hikaru learn to respect a man whose strength lies in knowledge rather than in the sword? Will Toshihisa accept a bride who is not the demure flower he expected? Even if the wedding occurs as planned, can these two people find happiness on their own? Or will the PCs have to intervene once again?

The course of true love never did run smooth.

18. Sins of the Father

Here's another adventure idea inspired by a Shakespeare play (this one loosely based on Macbeth). Enjoy!

CHALLENGE

A famous soothsayer with a knack for reading the omens of the future visits the household of Lord Takanobu. Takanobu is the lord of a major province, but there are rumors that his health is failing. His two sons and his seven grandsons have all returned to the family estate in order to help him manage the daily affairs, and everyone wants to know what advice he will elicit from the fortune-teller.

FOCUS

Lord Takanobu grants the soothsayer a private audience, and only two of his most trusted servants are allowed to remain while his fortune is told. Even his two sons, Washi and Kuma, are excluded from the reading of the omens.

Soon after the soothsayer departs, the body of Kuma's eldest son is found murdered in a nearby forest. Two days later, Kuma's second son falls prey to a sudden sickness and dies.

If they have not already taken it upon themselves to do so, the PCs will be asked for aid in protecting Kuma's two remaining children (a daughter and a son) and Washi's three children (two sons and a daughter).

STRIKE

Although the PCs may be able to guess what is going on by themselves, asking one of the servants who was present for Lord Takanobu's consultation with the fortune teller what transpired there will make things much clearer. When asked "How can I ensure the prosperity of my family for all time?" the soothsayer replied "Compare not the eagle and the bear, but choose between the fledgling and the cub." If pressed, the servant will also grudgingly reveal that he passed the same information to Washi as well.

Interpreting the omen as advice for his father to choose an heir from among his grandchildren, Washi has begun a campaign of murder against his brother's children in order to guarantee that his line be given leadership of the family. If he is not stopped, his murderous rampage could continue until it claims his brother, his brother's wife, and even his own father.

If you want to involve more combat, all three of Washi's children can be willing accomplices in the slaughter of their cousins. Or, if the PCs are too fast to finger a particular suspect, you can also change the identity of the murderer. Perhaps Washi is innocent, but his ambitious young son (or daughter) is the culprit. Or maybe Kuma is sacrificing his own children in an attempt to frame Washi and have him expelled from the Clan. After all, a healthy man can always have more children.

Also, if you have any prophecies or omens of your own that you wish to include in your campaign, the soothsayer's visit provides an excellent opportunity to do so. You can give clues about upcoming adventures, foreshadow challenges for specific characters, or simply give some cryptic prophecy and let the players figure out what it means.

19. The Shot Heard 'Round the Empire

As there have been a number of threads concerning gunpowder and historical firearms lately, here is an adventure seed for all you gun nuts out there. Try not to blow your fingers off.

CHALLENGE

A number of strange incidents have made a political rival of the Crab Clan suspicious that the Crab are violating the ban on trade with foreigners. The Crab are keeping a very tight lid on things, but some accidents (the explosion of a small amount of mishandled powder, a Crab bushi getting drunk and killing a ronin with a "magic stick", a wounded Shadowlands madman getting past the wall and reaching a city before succumbing to his "strange injuries") seem to support his theories. He asks the PCs to investigate "for the good of the Empire."

FOCUS

The Mantis sailors who brought the crates to the Crab are ignorant of the contents. Their job was simply to bring about a trade meeting between a Yasuki Trader and some gaijin merchants and help the Trader bring back his cargo. Their orders specifically forbade them from getting involved further.

If the characters dig a little deeper and risk incurring the wrath of the Crab, they can find that the Crab are indeed using gaijin pepper weapons against the Shadowlands (and have gained a significant advantage by doing so). If the Crab find out that the PCs have discovered this, there will be dire consequences. Depending on how the PCs entered Crab lands they might be set up for an "accident" or even be hunted as spies.

STRIKE

The proper thing to do in such a situation is to inform the superior of the samurai who have broken the decree so that they may administer the proper punishment. However, if the characters attempt to do so they find that the commander of the bushi who are using firearms is a willing participant in the deal. And his daimyo is also involved. And the Champion of the Crab as well!

If the characters try to bring the matter to public attention, they are approached by a servant of the Emperor who demands they desist. It seems that the Crab are acting with the permission of the Emperor himself! Rather than see the proliferation of guns across all of Rokugan, he has allowed the Crab to import a small amount in secret. While this bargain has enabled the Crab to continue their sacred duty, it has also given them an incredible military advantage over the rest of the Clans, and the PCs must decide what they will do in the face of this revelation.

If you want to give things a really wicked twist, the servant of the Emperor could secretly be a Tortoise Clan conspirator whose job is to keep news of the Crab Clan's treason from reaching the Emperor's ears. The Crab are still guilty! The game's not over!

Or, if you dislike giant conspiracies, the scandal can go up as far as the legion commander, forcing the Crab Champion to discipline an entire legion of badly needed troops.

For those who like having history repeat itself, the Crab could take their new toys to the Imperial Capitol. The amount of weaponry they have currently is sufficient for a coup, but they need a Crab Emperor on the throne in order to get permission for the supplies they really need. Of course, their treason is guided by noble intentions, for they seek the complete destruction of the Shadowlands. Or, the Crab could continue to serve the Emperor, but use their new might to bully the other clans. With trained ashigaru riflemen on the Wall, the Clan's bushi are free to make war and seize territory from those nearby.

Note that if you want to keep the Crab blameless, another Clan could also be used. The Unicorn, Dragon, and Phoenix all have conflicts with the Yobanjin tribes. The Scorpion could be hunting a new type of Lying Darkness spawn that is immune to the weapons of samurai. The Mantis might be fending off an invasion of gaijin from another nation. Only the Crane and the Lion would be difficult to implicate, and you would probably have to use an inter-clan conflict to justify either of those Clans using firearms.

20. To Know My Enemy

Following last week's theme of new weapons, here's a quest that you can use to give your players some new goodies.

CHALLENGE

The homes of the player characters are threatened by a band of unstoppable villains. They could be oni, kansen spirits, a new type of Living Shadow spawn, strange monsters, enchanted maho-tsukai, or even bandits with some sort of dark blessing. These "adversaries" are completely invulnerable to normal magic and weapons, and all who have tried to stop their bloody rampage have failed.

FOCUS

There are stories of weapons that might give one a fighting chance against these adversaries. Forged long ago, they were used by great heroes to defeat an "undying evil." If they could be found there might be hope, but in order to claim one of these weapons an individual must face numerous challenges.

STRIKE

Even if the characters manage to get the weapons they seek, the danger is not finished. The bond between the weapons and the adversaries they are intended to fight is a powerful one. It allows the wielder and the adversaries to sense each others' location and movements. Furthermore, it allows both the wielder and the adversaries to sense what is important and precious to the other. In the case of the adversaries, this is most likely their own safety and comfort. For the characters, however, their homes, families, friends, and lovers will all be subject to the adversaries' predation unless they act quickly.

The exact nature of the challenges the characters face on their way to retrieve the weapons is up to you. It could be a riddle, combat versus a guardian, a trial to convince the guardian of their sincerity, or even all of these combined. If you're feeling symbolic, you could have each of the characters face a challenge which they are especially suited for, or one that forces them to overcome their weaknesses.

If you want to be even more symbolic, send a number of adversaries equal to the number of player characters, making each a "dark reflection" of one of the heroes. The burly Hida could face a violent inhuman brute, while the quick and sneaky Bayushi might fight a shadowy assassin. Perhaps the experiences they had in gaining the weapons may give them some insight into defeating their counterparts.

21. Yoshimoto's Legacy

We've got more weapons this week. Nothing as exotic as last week, but challenging nonetheless.

CHALLENGE

The esteemed sensei Yoshimoto is retiring to a monastery, and wishes to distribute his worldly goods among his children, students, and friends.

FOCUS

Yoshimoto has a large collection of swords and weapons, several of which are remarkable. One is the katana which was handed down to him by his grandfather. Another is the katana which was given to him by the Emerald Champion. There is also the katana that he forged himself in memory of his late wife. He has a mysterious wakizashi of unknown origin that he found during the adventures of his youth. The ornate tessen he accepted from his daimyo could be used either on the battlefield or at court. And he still has the wooden practice sword that he used when he was a student so very long ago.

STRIKE

Yoshimoto does not select a gift for each character himself. Instead, he calls everyone together and asks them to decide amongst themselves. He listens to their discussion with interest, but he does not openly show favor or approval. If asked for advice he will remark that he is interested in knowing why each character chooses the item they desire simply because he wishes to know how his legacy will live on in the future. The final decision is up to the party members.

As always, you should change the name and background of Yoshimoto to fit your campaign. A figure who has ties as both a mentor and a family member to two or more of the player characters is ideal, but a close ally would also be sufficient. If your players' characters have no such ties, you can present Yoshimoto as an opportunity for them to gain such connections.

Hopefully your players will recognize that this is more than just a chance to "score some kewl loot," and make the most of the role-playing opportunities the situation presents. Giving bonus experience points for particularly inspired, in-character arguments for why one deserves a certain weapon is one way to do this. If you give the bonus experience points right then and there in front of the other players it could serve as a good motivation. If you want to make things a little more difficult you can make each weapon a minor nemuranai with an awakened spirit who demands the new owner justify their worthiness to wield the weapon.

22. Tarnished Promise

This week we take another look at the topic of weapons in the world of Rokugan. Over the last three weeks we've seen a lot of opportunities to give your players new weapons, but one should never forget the value of one's own blade. Your sword carries the soul of your ancestors, and it will guide you to victory.

CHALLENGE

After using or inspecting a treasured weapon that has been in the family for generations, one of the characters notices that the weapon is quite tarnished and has lost its sharp edge. Having an ill-maintained sword is both a social stigma and a serious liability in combat, so the natural course of action would be to have the sword sharpened and polished.

However, even after the character does so, the sword quickly becomes dull and tarnished again.

FOCUS

If a servant or professional sword-polisher cleaned the sword for the character, he may be the first to fall under suspicion. However, this is not the case, and the sword-polisher offers to clean the sword again (free of charge, of course) under the PC's watchful eye in order to prove the quality of his work.

If the player character cleaned the sword himself or had another NPC do it for him, his suspicions may be spread even wider. Although numerous figures could have been responsible, further investigation rules them out.

No matter what course of action the character takes in maintaining his blade and finding or stopping the culprit, the sword becomes dull and tarnished again within a few days.

STRIKE

If a shugenja or character with mystic awareness examines the blade and communes with the spirit inside the answer becomes clear. The sword's spirit is consumed by a deep despair. When the blade was forged, a promise was made between the sword and the character's ancestor. In recent years that promise has been forgotten, and the sword has lost its will to be wielded by members of that family. Unless the sword's spirit can be appeased, it will remain dull and useless forever.

The promise that the sword speaks of could be almost anything, from "I will give thanks to the elemental kami each morning and night" to "No liars or swindlers, bandits or monsters will prey on the people of my homeland and go unpunished." For a personal touch, you could choose an aspect of bushido that the character has consistently neglected, or an action that runs counter to the character's usual behavior. For example, a stingy samurai might have trouble with a vain blade who desires a new tsuba, handle and saya every month.

If the character's own actions have been above reproach, the sword might maintain an empathic link with all who have wielded it, or even with all members of the character's direct family. Has one of them done something dishonorable recently?

Finally, if the entire party has been involved in some dishonorable deed or failure of duty, they could all be refused the aid of their ancestral weapons until they make the situation right.

Although samurai should never expect any reward for their actions, it certainly wouldn't be inappropriate to bestow some new enhancement or ability on the newly awakened weapon upon completion of this adventure.

23. Ancestral Duty

This month marks the Obon season in Japan, when the spirits of the departed are said to return to Earth. As such, the theme for this month's CFS scenarios will be ghosts and ancestors. Now you and your players can enjoy the spooky side of summer in Japan...er, Rokugan.

CHALLENGE

In celebration of the bon festival, a Kitsu Sodan-Senzo blesses the characters and other members of the community. He calls upon the wisdom and guidance of the ancestral spirits to bring prosperity to the devout among their descendants and families.

FOCUS

By the following evening, all of the PCs and NPCs who were blessed are contacted by an ancestral spirit, effectively gaining the Haunted disadvantage for the next week. The exact nature of the haunting is up to the GM, and may range from a constant spiritual presence to intermittent visits.

STRIKE

The ancestors demand a variety of things from their descendants, calling on them to seek out misplaced heirlooms, build political alliances, and expand their holdings. The spirits are insistent, and have little care for how inconvenient or costly their missions may be for the characters. While these tasks may seem daunting and difficult, those who can complete them will indeed gain prosperity.

GMs may want to prepare a variety of backgrounds for the ancestral spirits to visit their players. Having all the players receive a visit from the founders of their respective families could strain credibility a bit, so it might be a good idea to include a mix of ancient heroes, great great-grandparents, and recently departed relatives.

Likewise, a variety of tasks can also be helpful in highlighting the differences between different characters. The ancestors know a great deal about their descendants' strengths and weaknesses, as well as many other

secrets. They can provide advice on successful military maneuvers, beneficial alliances, and even which members of the court will be most responsive to romantic advances...if the characters have the courage to listen and take action.

24. A Spirited Night Out

This week we continue the Obon theme and take another step into the world of ghosts and spirits. This week's adventure idea is a little on the risqué side, but most mature groups should be able to handle it. You have been warned!

CHALLENGE

While staying in a large city, one of the characters experiences horrible dreams. The details of the dream are forgotten upon waking, but he or she remembers a loud clicking noise, and is tired and disheveled in the morning, as if having tossed and turned a great deal during the night.

FOCUS

If the character does nothing the dreams get worse and worse, until sleep brings no rest. Eventually the character's health begins to suffer. Finally, the matron of a shady geisha house comes to confront the character about unpaid bills.

If the character tries to investigate or has others stand watch, it is discovered that he or she spends several hours each night in a geisha house in a disreputable part of town. While the character interacts with others somewhat normally, he or she has no memory of the night's events when the morning comes.

STRIKE

The character is being repeatedly possessed by a spirit from Gaki-do. The gaki is using the character to rouse passion and desire in others, which it feeds upon each night. (This doesn't need to be anything graphic—simply flirting is enough to satisfy the gaki's appetite.) While the gaki takes the form of an insect during the day, it is able to feed more effectively by using a sleeping mortal as a host at night.

Any interaction with the spirit reveals a further surprise. The spirit is a former comrade of the character in question. Trapped in Gaki-do after his death, the spirit sought out the character in an attempt to reconnect with his former life. He is desperate to escape Gaki-do, and claims that the character once pledged to help him in any way he or she could. Now that he is in his moment of greatest need, the gaki intends to take the character up on that offer.

Depending on how the interaction with the gaki goes, the adventure could end with a difficult moral dilemma, or a dramatic combat scene. Being possessed by the gaki inflicts no permanent physical harm, but it could cause a character's reputation to suffer and have significant negative social effects. Of course, there's also the psychological torment that may come from having to condemn a former friend to decades of insatiable hunger after he refuses to take no for an answer.

You could also use this adventure with an NPC in the role of the possession victim, but it would lose some of the punch that comes from having a personal connection between the gaki and the PCs. One choice is to make the victim the wife or lover or one of the characters, and have the gaki be one of his former rivals for her affection. The character's reaction could have a major impact on their long-term relationship.

25. An Unexpected Guest

Here in Japan we're right in the middle of the Obon season right now. There are a lot of amazing festivals and events going on to guide the spirits of the dead both to and from the mortal world. Of course, some spirits don't need that much help...

This scenario works best if one of the PCs already has the Haunted Disadvantage. If no one in the group has that particular problem the Bon festival is certainly a fine excuse to foist that Disadvantage onto a PC.

CHALLENGE

One of the PCs receives a sudden visit from an ancestral spirit, who requests permission to stay as a guest for the next week. While completely visible and audible, the spirit remains unable to interact with physical objects. As the arrival of a ghost would cause great panic and alarm, the spirit deeply wishes to conceal his or her ghostly nature from those who are not members or allies of the family, and asks the character for aid in doing so.

FOCUS

Keeping others from noticing that the spirit lacks a solid physical form is far from easy. Eating, drinking, engaging in swordplay, riding a horse, opening doors, and handling physical objects are all impossible for him or her. Furthermore, when the ancestor is nearby, animals may become agitated, and shugenja may feel a sensation that is normally associated with otherworldly spirits. Despite these limitations, however, he or she is determined to spend each day as normally as possible.

STRIKE

The returned ancestor actually has an agenda of his or her own. Being able to influence events in the mortal realm, even if unable to take action directly, is a refreshing change from the spirit's normal role as a source of advice and guidance. The mortal realm is full of nostalgia, and holds a powerful allure that is difficult for the shiryō to resist. If the character can give the ancestor a pleasant visit, good karma will most certainly follow. If the character allows the ancestor's secret to be discovered, however, the ancestor will be gravely embarrassed and may leave the mortal realm forever.

A great deal can be added to this scenario by fleshing out the personality of the ancestor who comes to visit. A loud braggart may attract a lot of negative attention or even be challenged to a duel. A flamboyant or debonair courtier may be invited to attend a noble lord or lady in private, while a rowdy and vivacious troublemaker will have to be watched closely in order to keep him from giving himself away.

It gets even more difficult if you remain true to the images of spirits as they are traditionally presented. Japanese ghosts have no feet! If the ancestor is wearing a long kimono when he or she arrives this might not be too noticeable, but many clans have different ideas of fashion, so this might not be a given. And an intangible ghost can't change clothes! A magical disguise might work, but it would certainly require more ingenuity and attention than if cast on a living being...

26: The Spirit's Son

As summer draws to a close, we bid farewell to the spirits and ghosts who have visited us this Obon season. While their time in this realm is short, they continue to watch over us and protect us from beyond. Or, in some cases, from even closer...

CHALLENGE

While traveling at night, the characters come upon a woman dressed in white. The woman is weeping and calling out for "Keisuke" (or "Keiko," if you prefer). Most characters should have no trouble recognizing the woman as an ubume—the spirit of a woman who died during childbirth. However, unlike most ubume spirits, she has no infant with her.

FOCUS

The ubume is distraught, but the characters can piece together her story if they are persistent. Once the geisha lover of a brave and honorable samurai, she was left without a patron to support her when her lover died in battle. After several difficult months on the road, she too died when complications set in during childbirth and there was no one to help her. Unable to leave the place where she died, she waited for someone to come and take her child so that she could rest in peace.

Finally, at long last, someone did come, and he did indeed agree to take and care for her precious son Keisuke.

It was only too late that she realized that the man she had entrusted her baby to was the infamous villain called Kurushii.

STRIKE

In order to free the ubume from her torment and sorrow, the characters will have to locate Kurushii, recover Keisuke from him, and deliver the boy to the spirit so that she can tell him the truth about his father and his heritage. Once she is certain that Keisuke will receive a proper upbringing, the ubume will be able to move on to the next stage in her existence. Otherwise, she will be trapped in a state of suffering forever.

Depending on how much time has passed between the time when Kurushii took the baby and the present, Keisuke might be an infant, a child, or even a young man. Furthermore, the length of time Keisuke has spent under Kurushii's influence may have had a profound effect on his outlook and character, and he could either be willing to accompany them or bent on their destruction.

The exact nature of Kurushii's villainy is up to you to decide. If you want to go the easy route, he can be simply one of the numerous bandit lords that plague Rokugan. If you want to give things a political spin, he need not be an actual villain, but could simply be a ronin guerilla who is opposed to the current local authority. And if you want to be really evil, he could be a member of the Lost, intent on taking Keisuke into the Shadowlands and raising him there.

This scenario could also be used to introduce a new player character and give details about his background. How Keisuke (or Keiko) will react to learning about his true heritage, and the difficulties in securing that heritage could provide an interesting motivation for a player who joins the campaign mid-way through.

Challenge, Focus, Strike!

Adventure Hooks for Legend of the Five Rings

VOLUME III: CFS OF THE WEEK #27 THROUGH #35

Written by Jsawa Nazomitsu (Scott Stockton) • Compiled & Edited by Pirate Spice (Sean C. Riley)

Foreword

Following is the third volume of a series of documents collecting the esteemed Isawa Nazomitsu's "CFS of the Week" feature in the L5R RPG GMs section of AEG's gaming forum (www.alderac.com/forum).

For the sake of further organizing these, I have attempted to give each hook a title (also taking inspiration from suggestions on the forum). The hooks themselves are presented in the order that they were originally posted, edited for brevity and typography.

This volume is shorter than the others, for the sake of keeping all of Nazomitsu's acclaimed Winter Court scenarios compiled in Volume IV.

– Sean C. Riley (a.k.a. Pirate Spice)

27. Silk and Skulduggery

It's a great day today. The sun is shining. The sky is clear. The birds are singing, and there's a nice cool breeze.

It looks like a perfect day for hunting bandits!

CHALLENGE

After ordering several bolts of fine silk from a merchant in another province, the characters' daimyo or superior assigns them to take the money for his purchase to the merchant and guard the caravan that will deliver his merchandise. The cloth will be used to make new ceremonial outfits for his children to wear upon completing their gempukku, and he impresses both its symbolic and monetary value on the characters.

FOCUS

The merchant in question is famous for the high quality and high prices of his wares, but there are rumors that his caravans have been plagued by bandit attacks in recent months. If the player characters investigate further, they can learn that almost half of the caravans he has sent throughout the summer have been raided.

Upon arrival at the merchant's warehouse, the characters find the caravan ready to depart. The merchant assures the characters that he has increased security and personally selected each of the new guards assigned to escort the shipment. After accepting payment from the characters, he wishes them a good journey and sends the caravan on its way.

STRIKE

After a few days on the road, the caravan is, not unexpectedly, attacked by bandits. The masked riders strike from a well-prepared ambush, and send the merchant's inexperienced guards running in panic. The bandits head straight for the bolts of cloth, snatch them away, and fade back into the wilderness as quickly as they came. They have an intimate knowledge of the surroundings, and will try to elude defenders rather than engage in direct combat.

These "bandits" are actually highly trained bushi in the merchant's employ. His business is struggling, and he hopes to recover some of his recent losses by selling the same merchandise to several customers. Since the characters paid for the cloth on the spot, he will claim that he delivered the merchandise as promised, and that its loss to the bandits was due to the characters' failure as guards.

If the characters manage to defeat all of the "bandits" or learn the merchant's secret, it would mean the end of the merchant's business. This is, of course, something he is dead set on avoiding.

If the characters press the issue with the merchant and you're feeling especially devious, you can have him offer to give a partial refund and replace the lost silk with some cloth of lesser value. After expressing his regret for their misfortune and amicably sending the characters on their way, the merchant will once again send his thugs to seize the merchandise they have purchased. Or maybe he sends them to put an end to their nosy meddling...

One point that can often be a problem in scenarios like this is dealing with the capabilities of the player characters. If the players are clever and their characters are skilled, it can be difficult to let the bandits get away with the robbery without it looking like the PCs have no say in the outcome. Use your best judgement, and don't be afraid to let the player characters win. Maybe the merchant will change his business plan and beg the characters for help in defeating real bandits.

28. Twenty Koku

Some more trouble with bandits today. Your average bandit is a dishonorable and unreasonable lout, but every so often you'll find one who will give you an even break. That is, as long as he comes out on top.

CHALLENGE

A peasant approaches one of the player characters bearing a message on a scrap of paper. He explains that a man with a heavy beard told him to deliver the note. He knows nothing else about the situation, except that the man who approached him was a stranger.

FOCUS

The message could be any of the following:

FROM THE BLACKMAILER

I know your secret. Bring 20 koku to the abandoned warehouse next to the lake tomorrow night or I will reveal everything.

FROM THE KIDNAPPER

We have captured your wife/son/daughter/etc. Bring 20 koku to the warehouse by the lake tomorrow night or else. Come alone.

FROM THE EXPLORER

I've found something you've been looking for. Meet me in the empty building by the lake tomorrow night and we'll discuss a trade. My price is 20 koku.

FROM THE YOJIMBO

Our lord is in great danger! I have found a way to save him, but we'll need 20 koku to make it work. Time is of the essence. Meet me in the old warehouse tomorrow night.

FROM THE INNKEEPER

Your sister/brother can't pay for all the sake they drank. Bring 20 koku to the lakeside warehouse tomorrow night or we'll turn the matter over to your daimyo.

STRIKE

The message is a fake, written by a traveling cartographer named Miya Horikawa. Horikawa met the player characters briefly in a roadside tea house about a week ago, and although they did not speak at length he did remember their names. Shortly after they parted ways, Horikawa was attacked by bandits who intended to rob and ransom him. However, with little money and no living relatives, there was no way Horikawa could satisfy their demands.

Facing death at the hands of angry brigands, Horikawa remembered the player characters. After convincing the bandits that the party would be willing to pay for his release, he sent the blackmail/ransom/summons message to draw the characters to his aid.

Of course, the player characters might be surprised to find a gang of bandits and a captive map maker when they arrive expecting something else entirely, but Horikawa figures he'll cross that bridge when he comes to it.

Remember that the only things Horikawa knows about the player characters are details that he overheard or observed in their brief meeting, and there is no guarantee that any assumptions he makes based on those observations will be correct. Adjust the message appropriately. For example, if a party member is traveling with a child, he might conclude that the character has a wife who is somewhere else, and any knowledge Horikawa claims to have of a Dark Secret is based simply on the appearance of the character in question.

If you want to give this adventure a slightly humorous touch, Horikawa can send various messages to every member of the party in an attempt to hedge his bets. Characters might receive ransom notes for children they don't have, letters from people they have never met, or even pleas for help from comrades they are traveling with.

29. Smoke and Mirrors

Player characters are a dangerously ingenious lot. They attempt the unexpected, try the impossible, and dare to take actions that others would deem madness.

If bandits (long considered by many to be the natural enemies of player characters) are to stand a chance in such a hostile environment, they must be at least as adaptable and sneaky, if not more so.

CHALLENGE

While traveling through a lonely stretch of unfamiliar territory, the party meets a similarly sized group of travelers. The travelers come from a mix of clans and families, but enjoy a camaraderie that borders on the familiar. While their clothes and equipment are worn from their long travels, they offer the characters hospitality and friendly conversation at their camp for the night.

FOCUS

One of the travelers raises the alarm in the middle of the night, reporting voices in the darkness. Fearing bandits, he asks for help in investigating the noise.

A few minutes later, shapes can be seen moving through the trees on the opposite side of the camp.

Shouts are heard in the distance.

More shapes are seen, and one of the travelers shouts that a man is going after the horses.

More voices cry out, and the sound of battle is heard.

The fire suddenly disappears.

Chaos breaks loose.

STRIKE

The entire "bandit attack" is merely a ruse being perpetrated by the group of travelers using illusion spells, misdirection, hidden accomplices, smoke, mirrors, dummies on pulleys, and other mundane means. Their aim is to lure as many of the characters away from the camp as possible and distract the rest, giving them time to take what they can from the characters' belongings. They will do their best to keep the player characters from suspecting their true nature, preferring deception to outright combat, and will flee into the night if it looks as if they will be caught.

If the bandits seem outmatched, feel free to give them a few extra skills. Perhaps they learned some actual skills from the bushi they stole their arms and armors from before robbing them. Or maybe their shugenja have memorized spells beyond simple illusions. They might even have a number of traps hidden in the forest beyond the campfire, which they will gladly lead the player characters into while searching for "bandits."

Remember, dirty tricks are only dirty when you compare them to Bushido. Once you get past your unhealthy obsession over playing fair, they look just fine.

30. Death and Taxes

The weather is getting cooler, and autumn will soon be in full swing. In a few months, winter will be upon us. Are you prepared?

CHALLENGE

The player characters are asked to visit a small, remote farming village and collect the taxes that it owes. The village is not a major source of income, but every koku of rice counts when the chill winds of winter begin to blow.

FOCUS

Upon entering the village, the player characters find the inhabitants waiting for them, barring their path. Their faces bear expressions of fear mixed with grim determination, and although they are armed with nothing more than farming tools, some sharpened wooden spears and a few knives, they have the advantage of superior numbers over the characters.

The village headman steps forward and announces in a nervous voice that the residents of the village are revolting. "We will pay no taxes," he declares. "You will not get the rice in the warehouse, nor the treasures in the temple, or any of the money in my home! Turn away now and leave in peace!"

STRIKE

The "peasant revolt" is not what it seems. A large group of bandits has taken over the village, and are holding the villagers' children hostage. Even though it may cost them their own lives, the farmers have no choice but to go along with the bandits' plan if they want to save their children. The bandits plan to spend the next week taking as much rice as they can carry back to their camp in order to stock up for the winter, leaving the villagers to face the wrath of the Imperial Tax Collectors.

Although the bandits threatened to kill the village children if the village headman said anything suspicious, the player characters might gain a small clue from his seemingly defiant words. All of the locations he mentioned are being used as barracks by members of the bandit gang, and if the characters investigate carefully they might be able to learn the truth behind the matter. If they find some way to check the temple without being seen they will discover the captive children, which should certainly be a sign that something is amiss.

In the (hopefully unlikely) event that the characters try to slaughter the villagers, the bandits will take the opportunity to escape in the confusion. The villagers will attempt to defend themselves, but ultimately surrender once it becomes apparent that their situation is hopeless. Unless they do something to solve the problem, the characters may find themselves forced to report both the loss of the village's taxes and the death of its inhabitants to their superiors.

If the characters decide to leave the village alone or report the incident to a higher authority (or simply need a hint to get them started) you can have them find a young boy named Junpei hiding in the woods. Although Junpei does not know the full situation, he can tell the heroes that some strangers have caused all the adults in the village to start acting strangely and scared him into hiding.

Of course, if you want to be really evil you could always decide that even after defeating the bandits there is not enough rice for the villagers to pay their taxes and feed themselves...

31. Crime and Punishment

As this month draws to a close let us remember that, though they have slipped from the Celestial Order, bandits are people too.

CHALLENGE

A gang of bandits ambushes and attempts to rob the party. While they have some small measure of martial skills, their training is not up to that of disciplined clan samurai, and the fight soon turns against the bandits. As soon as the leader is slain, most of the others turn and flee. One, however, drops his sword, kneels in the dirt, and begs for mercy.

FOCUS

The bandit reveals that his name is Ryota and tells the characters that his wife, adolescent son, and young daughter wait for him in a old hut in the woods. He admits his crimes and accepts the player characters' judgement, but he pleads for the chance to see his family one last time before the end.

If asked, Ryota explains that he was once a caravan guard for the Scorpion, but when his employer was executed for treason it became impossible for him to find work. With no profitable skills beyond fighting, he turned to a life of crime in order to support his family. Although he regrets his actions, he could not bear to watch his loved ones starve.

STRIKE

The law states that the penalty for engaging in banditry is death. If the party takes Ryota to the authorities, he will be executed. Without a father, Ryota's family will be left without any means of support and their chances of making it through the winter will be almost non-existent. The fate of Ryota and his innocent children lie in the hands of the player characters.

Depending on what the characters choose to do, a number of other problems and moral dilemmas may present themselves. If the characters decide to look after Ryota's family on his behalf, they will have to tread carefully. What will they say to Ryota's widow? How will his children react? If the characters spare Ryota's life, it will still be necessary for him to find a source of income besides a life of crime. Do they leave him to fend for himself, or try to lend a helping hand? If they execute Ryota and leave his family to die in the cold, will they truly be able to live with their decision?

If your players are especially capable and the initial fight ends too quickly, you can have still Ryota ask the characters for help. Simply have him linger at the "Down" wound level long enough to beg for mercy. Of course, some samurai may be hesitant to expend resources healing a bandit who just attacked him, but it would take a truly heartless individual to refuse to deliver a message on a dying man's behalf.

People fall. Champions rise again. True heroes help those around them to stand.

32. The Bloodscroll Saga: A Familiar Face

October is Zombie Month here at CFS Emporium! Every week up until Halloween, I'll be presenting a new zombie-related adventure seed for your enjoyment.

But wait! There's more! This month's CFS ideas are designed to be played either separately, or combined into a month-long campaign of zombie horror. That's four times the undead of your regular CFS scenario! How can you go wrong?

It all starts with a personal problem...

CHALLENGE

An old rival of one of the player characters picks a fight with the party in broad daylight. If the characters try to ignore him or do nothing, he attacks them outright, growling like a wild animal.

He does not stop fighting until he is killed.

FOCUS

The rival returns on the next day, attacking the player characters once again. His face and skin show signs of some illness, and his clothes still bear the bloodstains from the previous day's battle. While he retains his martial skills, his manner is that of a berserk madman, and his only words are shouted demands for the heroes to kill him.

If he is defeated but not destroyed, he once again returns on the next day.

And the day after that. And the day after that as well.

And each day thereafter.

STRIKE

The character's rival has suffered a dire fate. He has been cursed with undeath, and every moment of his existence brings physical torment and spiritual anguish. His only desire is to die, but the dark essence inside his body will not let him fall without a fight. Furthermore, each time he is "slain" and reanimated, Jigoku's grasp on his soul is strengthened.

His only hope is for the cunning and resourceful player characters to find a way to end the curse and kill him forever before his soul is lost completely.

If the players have skills or resources that would make killing the undead rival too easy (such as powerful Fire spells, jade weapons, etc.), augment the rival as necessary. Magic Resistance, Strength of the Earth, Combat Reflexes, jade-resistant enchanted armor, and/or Shadowlands Powers can all increase the threat that the rival presents. Or, you could even have him return from the ashes, completely reformed!

On the other hand, if things get too difficult you can let the heroes destroy their undead enemy through simple brute force, even without finding a way to dispel his curse. Even with zombie attacks, there can be such a thing as too much of a good thing, so be prepared to adapt your story appropriately.

Of course, you can always have a character with a different relationship to the PCs take the place of the rival in this scenario. A complete stranger who has heard of the PCs only in passing might chose them to end his suffering. Perhaps it is a magistrate or other authority figure. Or, an old friend or lover could be the victim of the curse, alternating between mindless violence and moments of lucidity where he or she begs for death.

EXTENSION

After the rival is put to rest permanently, the player characters are approached by a servant. He apologizes for the erratic actions of his master, and offers a boon on behalf of his master's family if the PCs will find the reason for his sudden dark transformation.

The only lead he has is the name of a town where the poor man visited a friend before he was cursed. While he was not with his master during the visit, he is certain that whatever changed him happened there, and he appeals to the characters' sense of honor, begging them to investigate.

The name of the town is Tsunan. It is not far away.

33. The Bloodscroll Saga: The Zombie Plague

Following in the footsteps of last week's CFS scenario, we have another adventure full of zombies for your enjoyment.

If you have already run last week's scenario, the player characters may be aware that there is something strange going on in Tsunan. Even if you have not used that adventure, you can still use this week's CFS without any special preparation. The zombies will just be that much more of a surprise.

CHALLENGE

Not long after arriving in the town of Tsunan, the player characters hear news of (or encounter for themselves) wandering zombies attacking defenseless civilians. While the zombies appear to be simple walking corpses with no special features or abilities, their presence in such a remote area is a sure sign that something unusual is afoot.

Not long after their arrival, the characters are targeted by a zombie attack.

FOCUS

The residents explain that the zombie attacks have been going on for almost a full month, and have claimed several victims. Furthermore, the zombies seem to carry a sickness in their bodies which affects anyone who is struck by their attacks. The local magistrate, the head of the nearby temple, and several strong carpenters who tried to stand against the living dead have all either been killed or have gone missing. (If the characters played through last week's CFS scenario, they can learn that their rival who was cursed with life in death was also a victim of the zombies.) The villagers have managed to defend themselves for the most part, but the constant attacks are taking a heavy toll on their numbers.

If the player characters remain in town, they witness another zombie attack within the week.

STRIKE

There are actually two culprits working together in the town. One is the local healer, who has a subtle skill in using poisons. The other is an eta mortician with knowledge of blood magic. After each zombie attack, the healer administers a slow acting poison to any victims who have been injured. Of course, anyone who dies in the village, either at the hands of the zombies or as a result of the healer's poison, is taken to the mortician. Instead of cremating the body, however, the mortician simply gives the victim's family a urn of plain ashes, mutilates the body's face beyond recognition, and animates the corpse as a zombie to repeat the cycle.

Unless something is done to stop the two villain's unholy actions, Tsunan will eventually become a town of the dead.

If the player characters do not bother to gather information from the inhabitants of the town, it may take some time for them to find out exactly what is happening. If this happens, you may have to drop some obvious hints. One option is having the zombies kill a victim with an unusual body type (especially fat, very tall and slim, short and hunched over, missing an arm or leg) in view of the heroes. When a zombie with the same body type attacks the next day they should get a basic idea of where to look for clues.

EXTENSION

When the player characters have their final showdown with the two maho-tsukai (and their guardian zombies), either the healer or the mortician will flee, pull a scroll from inside the folds of their kimono, and try to destroy it. If the characters retrieve the scroll before it can be completely destroyed, it reveals a shocking piece of news.

*The bloodscrolls are ready. We can now move on to the second stage.
Come to the cave on Mt. Kougen when you have conquered Tsunan.
Do not fail me.*

Mt. Kougen is just a few days ride from Tsunan, in a remote, uninhabited area of the Empire.

It is said to be cursed.

*The plot thickens! What evil could possibly await our heroes?
More zombies, of course!*

34. The Bloodscroll Saga: The Dead Shall Rise

This week's scenario builds on the events described in last week's adventure. If the player characters are not aware of the problems that are coming from Mt. Kougen, you can always have their superior order them to travel there to investigate strange signs, or simply have them wander upon the place by chance. Any reason for them to be in the area should suffice to get them involved.

Besides, getting out again will be the hard part...

CHALLENGE

Upon reaching Mt. Kougen the player characters discover a cave. While the cave mouth appears natural, the area nearby shows signs of unusually heavy traffic for such a remote area. Further in, the cavern opens up into a network of linked caves, with bloodstains on the floor and walls.

FOCUS

Once the characters have proceeded far enough into the cave to be out of sight of the entrance, they come across a group of cultists in red robes. One runs away, calling out "Master! Run!" The others draw long knives and attack, fighting until either they or the heroes are killed.

If the party continues into the cave, they find a maze of twisting passages with cultists hiding within. Cultists and their zombie slaves.

STRIKE

Upon reaching the deepest chamber of the cavern, the characters discover a secret laboratory. Although the leader of the cultists seems to have escaped, his instruments remain. Among the unspeakable items present, a crimson scroll can be found. Although the scroll's taint is not concentrated enough to cause any harm to a character who touches or carries it, it radiates incredible evil, and resists any attempts to destroy it.

It also causes any dead body within 100 yards to become animated as a mindless zombie, ensuring that any cultists the characters killed on the way in will be waiting for them on the way out.

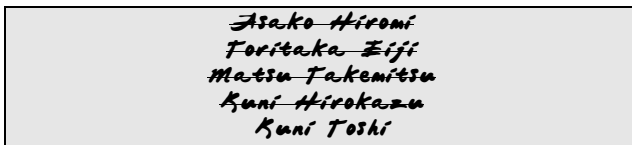
You can adjust the level of danger that this adventure presents quite a bit by adapting the layout of the cavern and the number of enemies within. If the party is having a hard time, place the final chamber near the entrance and reduce the number of cultists and zombies within the intervening rooms. On the other hand, if you want to drive home the fact that the characters are entering the lair of a powerful maho-tsukai you can pull all the stops and throw wave after wave of the living dead at them as they wander through a dark maze.

If the characters attempt to leave the cave, you can either force them to stay or let them leave. In either case, the cultists will be dead set on eliminating them. As practitioners of maho, their lives are forfeit if the player characters survive to tell their story, and they will do anything to prevent the heroes from returning to civilization.

The same applies if the characters leave behind the bloodscroll. By having discovered the cave they know too much, and the unseen master will mark them for death as he has his other enemies. It's simply a matter of when he will strike.

EXTENSION:

A note is next to the bloodscroll.



All of the names listed are those of magistrates specializing in finding and destroying maho-tsukai. If the characters investigate further, they find that all the magistrates who have been crossed off the list have been killed within the last two months.

The last magistrate, Kuni Toshi, is retired. The fortress he resides in is off the beaten path, but not hard to find.

Unless someone else finds him first.

35. The Bloodscroll Saga: Army of Darkness

Editor's Note: Apologies to Sam Raimi for the title of this one...I just couldn't help myself!

Following up on last week's adventure, this week's CFS has more zombies than you can shake a jade studded tetsubo at. This scenario has the most specific set-up of any of this month's zombie adventures, but it's also easy to adapt, and it offers (I hope) a big pay-off for any necessary preparation.

Assuming the characters took the bloodscroll from Mt. Kougen to Kuni Toshi's fortress, everything should be ready to go. Proceed through the scenario as written.

If the characters sought out Kuni Toshi but did not take the bloodscroll, simply assume that it has fallen into the hands of Satsujinki. This makes the player characters' job much, much harder, as they will have to reach Satsujinki and seize the scroll before the zombies can be slain.

If the characters took the bloodscroll but did not visit Kuni Toshi, Satsujinki will attack them anyway, seeking to eliminate any who have knowledge of his plan. The characters may find themselves under siege in a less ideal location, with only limited knowledge of their situation. If so, you may want to give them some extra information or resources to even things out.

If the characters did not take the scroll or seek out Kuni Toshi, Satsujinki will attack them at his leisure. As above, without the bloodscroll in hand or any extra information, the PCs will have a hard time of things. But on the other hand, it might teach them to be more careful in the future.

If the PCs have not played through any of the previous chapters of this month's adventure, simply have them visit Kuni Toshi on routine business. Or, you could have the zombie attack target any NPC in the same area the PCs happen to be traveling in. After all, part of being a hero is facing any challenge that comes your way...whether you asked for it or not.

CHALLENGE

While consulting with Kuni Toshi, the famous magistrate tells the characters of his long conflict with the maho-tsukai known as Satsujinki—"The Cutthroat." Several years ago, he and four other magistrates led a force of soldiers and stopped Satsujinki and his followers from slaughtering an entire temple full of monks. Since that time, the madman has sought some way to build his own army to terrorize the Empire. From the looks of recent events, it appears that he is nearing his goal.

If the characters have the bloodscroll, Kuni Toshi researches a way to end its power. In the meantime, he invites the heroes to stay as his guests.

FOCUS

The next day, Kuni Toshi announces that he has found a way to destroy the bloodscroll. The purification ritual requires several hours of concentration, but, when completed, should end all effects of the dark artifact. Although he insists that his guests relax, he begins preparing scrolls and materials in order to begin the ritual as soon as possible.

That evening, just before dusk, a large mass of people is sighted coming up the hill to the fortress from the nearby village. From a distance they appear to be farmers and heimin laborers. As they approach, however, it becomes clear that the villagers are no longer alive—the crowd is a mob of zombies!

As the call to arms goes out, a second alarm is raised. The second squadron of guards has succumbed to undeath as well! There are zombies inside the fortress!

STRIKE

The power of the bloodscroll animates all creatures that die within its area of effect. In turn, the potency and range of the artifact are increased by the presence of Satsujinki nearby. Knowing this, the maho-tsukai systematically executed every resident of the village in order to amass an army with which to kill his hated enemy and take back the bloodscroll.

Furthermore, Satsujinki called upon a hidden ally to aid him in his attack. The second squadron of guards was poisoned at dinner time by a traitorous servant who sought to take the fortress from within. Unless he is discovered and stopped, the cultist will strike again, causing more defenders to join the ranks of the undead.

The zombies' sheer numbers mean it is only a matter of time before they break through the outer walls. The longer the siege continues, the larger Satsujinki's army will become, as any guards, servants, members of the household, or guests who are killed in the siege will also rise as zombies. If the fortress is not held until Kuni Toshi can complete his ritual, all is lost. Unless the PCs act quickly, hope is as good as dead.

It's Halloween, so go all out on this one. There are zombies outside and inside, so no place is safe. Satsujinki's army of undead villagers is a constant threat, but the zombified members of the second squadron can also strike without warning, picking off stragglers. The need to maintain a constant defense, secure the interior of the fortress, and locate any materials that Toshi forgot to prepare for the ritual (he didn't count on having to complete it so quickly) should prevent the PCs from gathering everyone into one room to fight it out. Play up the sense that death can come from anywhere at any time, turn down the lights, ramp up the body count, and have fun.

Challenge, Focus, Strike!

Adventure Hooks for Legend of the Five Rings

VOLUME IV: CFS OF THE WEEK #36 THROUGH #52

Written by Jsawa Nazomitsu (Scott Stockton) • Compiled & Edited by Pirate Spice (Sean C. Riley)

Foreword

Following is the fourth volume of a series of documents collecting the esteemed Isawa Nazomitsu's "CFS of the Week" feature in the L5R RPG GMs section of AEG's gaming forum (www.alderac.com/forum).

For the sake of further organizing these, I have attempted to give each hook a title (also taking inspiration from suggestions on the forum). The hooks themselves are presented in the order that they were originally posted, edited for brevity and typography.

This volume is longer than the others, for the sake of keeping all of Nazomitsu's acclaimed Winter Court scenarios (not to mention his wicked oni scenarios) together.

– Sean C. Riley (a.k.a. Pirate Spice)

36. Character Assassination

In August we faced haunting ghosts and restless spirits. In September we fought roving gangs of vicious bandits. In October we battled bloodthirsty hordes of zombies. Now it's time for something even more terrifying:
Winter Court.

CHALLENGE

The PCs are asked to escort a popular young courtier to Winter Court. The courtier, Saya, is the daughter of a powerful lord and is an influential figure in the Court in her own right. While her father will host guests in his own home, she will travel to visit another Clan.

Just after reaching the palace where they will spend the winter, however, the characters receive an anonymous message warning that an assassin will attempt to kill Saya sometime during Winter Court.

FOCUS

A number of people who could be considered Saya's enemies are present in the court, ranging from childhood rivals to political opponents. Further, several generals who have fought heated battles against her father are also there. And the ex-lover of Saya's betrothed. And the son of the mahotsukai she gave testimony against last winter. And the list goes on! Every delegation contains at least one person who seems likely to be behind the death threat.

STRIKE

The warning was actually sent by Kouji, one of Saya's aides. Jealous of the attention and praise she received, the young man blamed her for his failure to gain recognition in the courts. Although he does not actually intend to have her killed, he does want her taken out of the picture long enough so that he has a chance to shine. By instilling a sense of tension and paranoia in Saya, Kouji hopes to create a chance to gain glory for himself by taking over her regular duties.

Saya's reaction to the death threat depends on the type of personality you want to give her. If she takes the threat seriously, she agrees to any precautions the PCs suggest, even to the point of staying isolated in her chambers if they believe it is necessary. This will make Kouji quite happy, as he will be able to schmooze to his heart's content. On the other hand, if Saya insists on living her life as normal, it may cause the PCs some serious woes in their attempts to keep her safe. Numerous dignitaries and courtiers request private meetings with her every day, and her nights are often spent in romantic walks with her betrothed. Needless to say, these are not settings in which armed guards are welcome.

Of course, for those who like the simple and classic "assassination threat" style, the plot involving Kouji can be discarded in favor of another culprit. There are numerous people who would like to kill Saya, and any one of them could have hired an assassin. Or perhaps, in a moment of weakness, the ambitious Kouji became an accomplice, and his "meetings" with other courtiers are actually updates on the security plans of the player characters.

The troubles need not end with the exposure of Kouji's scheming, either. Saya's popularity is not the only reason he has not been promoted—his skill as a diplomat is sadly lacking. While Saya has been sequestered away for her own protection, he has managed to anger and offend several powerful daimyos. If something is not done to mend relations soon the spring thaws may see a declaration of war, and the job is too big for Saya to handle alone.

Ah, the joys of Court...

37. Poetic License

The weather continues to get colder and colder. Winter is almost upon us. You have secured an invitation to Court, haven't you?

CHALLENGE

A week or so after the start of Winter Court, one of the characters is asked to give a private poetry recital for an important member of his clan who is present in the palace. The woman is quite old and has difficulty leaving her room, but her grandson Tatsu is on hand to attend to her during the character's visit, and she is greatly appreciative of the gesture.

FOCUS

When court is assembled the next day, Tatsu stands before the host and recites the player character's best poem as if it were his own. The host reacts quite favorably, heaping ample praise on the young man. Tatsu responds by reciting a few more of the character's compositions.

STRIKE

One of the many courtiers present remarks that the player character is reported to be a skilled poet as well. Hearing this, the host of the Winter Court then turns to the character in question and asks if he can match Tatsu's display of poetic skill.

Remember that everyone is watching this exchange as it happens. Winter Court is a social affair, and just about everything takes place in the public eye. As such, there could be numerous consequences for the character's actions.

Dealing with Tatsu can be a one-time event, or a continuing problem for the character. He could be a talentless hack, or a skilled but unscrupulous poet in his own right. Likewise, he could be a relative nobody within the court, or have numerous connections to call upon if necessary.

If possible, have the player of the character in question actually compose some poems for the recital in the Challenge section (which you can steal for Tatsu's big performance later on). Be careful if he or she comes up with too many poems, however, because having a stock of poems eliminates a lot of the pressure in this scenario.

*Colder than the snow,
This icy blade in my heart –
A friend's betrayal.*

38. Contagious Rumors

I'm afraid I'm feeling a little under the weather this week. I suspect the cold I'm suffering from came from one of my students. One interesting thing about the Japanese people I teach: When someone nearby is ill, they react quite fearfully. When they themselves are sick, however, they have no qualms about exposing others.

But at least my suffering can bring some benefit for others...

CHALLENGE

During Winter Court, the party members find themselves in a position where they must negotiate with various emissaries from a number of different Clans and families. They could be making a business deal to secure vital resources for their Clan, arranging a marriage to cement an alliance, exchanging military secrets about a rival Clan, or trying to find (or hide) information about a political scandal. Whatever their mission, it will require several meetings and a great deal of politicking.

FOCUS

Early in the season, one or more of the characters are exposed to a sickness of some sort. It could be an allergic reaction to some harmless substance, a cold caught while venturing outside in the winter chill, or just a passing sore throat picked up from a servant. Whatever the nature of the illness, it is brief and non-fatal, but unpleasant enough to require rest in private.

STRIKE

The court is soon filled with rumors about "the true nature" of the characters' illness. This could be simple gossip, or malicious lies spread by one of the party's rivals. One version says that the characters have been afflicted by the Shadowlands Sickness. Another claims that it is an outbreak of the Ebon Fever which swept the Empire fifty years ago. Even the mildest rumors speak of infectious fevers and punishments from the Fortunes, causing many to give the party a wide berth.

With such whispered warnings in circulation, how will the characters manage to convince anyone to meet or speak with them and complete their mission?

If you want to make things even more difficult for the party, this scenario can also be reversed. Infect one or more members of the Clans they must speak to with a disease such as influenza or typhoid fever and set up the Rokugani version of Outbreak. Will the characters risk their health for the sake of speaking to a potential ally? Will they risk being shunned by other members of the court for speaking to an afflicted person?

Keep in mind that Rokugani medical knowledge is not equal to the scientific expertise we have today. While healers can recognize symptoms, treat illnesses, and prevent diseases from spreading to a limited degree, the nature and causes of diseases are still a mystery to even the most learned scholars. People know enough to avoid victims who are sick because they observe the sickness spreading to others nearby. But the cause of the illness may as well be evil spirits, and even a case of the flu can be fatal in such a society. Thus, the best advice possible is to keep one's distance and pray to the Fortunes.

39. Don't Bite More Than You Can Chew

For those of you who live outside the United States, today is Thanksgiving. For those of you who do live in the USA, have a Happy Turkey Day!

And while the holiday may not be traditionally celebrated in Rokugan, there's no reason why we can't have a feast anyway.

CHALLENGE

A friendly young man named Kawachi (or another friend or clan mate of the characters) approaches the PCs with an idea. He has noticed that recent bad weather has cast a dark cloud over Winter Court, and he wants to do something to brighten people's spirits. To that end, he proposes an elaborate dinner party with lavish food, and asks the PCs if they would help him organize it.

FOCUS

While Kawachi's idea has merit, his guest list and his menu are both overly ambitious. He has asked several people from every clan to attend, and while none of the guests are particularly powerful, they are all quite active in spreading gossip around the courts. Furthermore, the menu is also quite complex. Kawachi intends to serve sashimi, chopped seaweed salad, red miso soup, dried pheasant, pickled cucumbers, grilled fish, chestnut rice, and marinated mandarin oranges. And, to better bring joy to his guests, he'll make the entire meal by himself.

If the characters ask around, they can find out that while Kawachi is an aspiring cook, the only item on the menu he has any experience in preparing is red miso soup.

STRIKE

If the player characters let Kawachi go through with his plan to prepare the entire feast by himself, they run a terrible risk. If the meal is not a success, his reputation in the courts will surely be ruined. But if they come out and tell him their concerns directly, he's certain to be insulted and dejected. While his confidence in his own cooking skills may be overblown, he does sincerely want to make people happy through his own efforts.

Perhaps the player characters can find some way to make everyone happy at the same time. And enjoy some good food while they're at it.

If you want to put a light-hearted spin on this adventure, increase Kawachi's skill in the kitchen to make him a master chef. Then have his assistants fall ill. Instead of flexing their diplomatic skills to find a way to make the banquet a success, the PCs will have to take an active hand in making the banquet itself. Of course, with Kawachi's guidance there shouldn't be any problem...right?

You can also raise the stakes by playing up the social nature of Winter Court. Important figures will want to know whether or not one of Kawachi's feasts is worth going to in the future. Aspiring courtiers will want to have a hand in its success. Rivals of the Clan will want to prevent him from gaining influence with his grandstanding. And the PCs will have a good deal to gain from either side.

For more information about historical Japanese food (as well as some recipes) this site is an excellent resource. Turns out some of our "traditional" favorites like sushi and tempura aren't all that traditional after all. Definitely worth a look.*

* <http://fibers.destinyslobster.com/Japanese/Food/japfood.htm>

BONUS CFS: THE IRON CHEF VERSION!

CHALLENGE

Kawachi has another problem. He's been called upon to prepare dinner for a distinguished courtier (Otomo Amato), his yojimbo (Yotsu Karami), and the Abbot of a temple to Hotei (Master Nigasa). He's gathered the ingredients for his famous red miso soup, and he's selected a nice area of the palace in which to hold the event. But he's not sure how to keep the trio entertained for the entire evening by himself, and he wants to know if it would be possible, maybe, if they're not busy, for the party to accompany him?

FOCUS

As soon as the Abbot meets the party he becomes visibly excited. He reveals that his duties as a temple keeper have always kept him too busy to pursue his lifelong dream of traveling the Empire. While Hotei has blessed him with a warm bed and a full meal every night, he would dearly like to sample the cuisines of other Clans, and he asks the player characters which type of food is the best in the Empire.

Upon hearing their ideas, Otomo Amato challenges Kawachi and the player characters to prepare the foods they have suggested. After all, he claims, if those dishes really are as delicious as the player characters say, even the efforts of an unskilled cook would be a pleasure to try. Upon hearing this idea, Abbot Nigasa jumps in with an offer to pray to Hotei on behalf of the person who could bring him such joy with their cooking, and even Karami asks the characters if they really believe that their Clans' cuisines are the best in the Empire..

Of course, if their suggestions were made not with confidence, but simply misguided pride, they're welcome to back down...

STRIKE

Kawachi has a good relationship with the kitchen staff of the palace, and is able to call upon just about any common ingredients or cooking materials needed for the competition. While this is good news for the PCs, it also means that Kawachi can prepare just about any food he has heard of. While the loser of such an impromptu and unorthodox contest faces no social stigma, the blessings of a monk of Hotei (and the respect of allies in the Court) are not a prize to pass up lightly. Not to mention the pride to be gained from defending the honor of one's Clan.

If the player characters are ill-prepared to deal with the challenge, you can tone down the level of competition Kawachi presents by having him choose to prepare a dish other than his famous red miso. If you have a few aspiring chefs in the party, however, you can take off the kid gloves and let them face off against a delicious soup featuring baby clams, tofu, seaweed, and fine vegetables.

The preferences and personality quirks of the three guests, unforeseen difficulties in cooking, attempts to outdo other characters, and outside interference can all add levels of complexity to this contest. Rather than boiling things down to a single die roll, breaking the challenge into several different stages and asking the players for their strategy in each stage can make the process more involved and enjoyable. And if someone finds a way to use a bugei skill, school technique, or mystic spell to their advantage, more power to them!

And of course, if you wished to build an entire campaign around this sort of thing, there are always new venues to aspire to. Why satisfy yourself with being an Iron Chef when you could be the Jade Chef, or even the Emerald Chef of the Emperor himself?

40. Good Fortune, Bad Company

Winter Court continues. For many, the court is filled with rivals and enemies. For others, it holds countless friends and allies. And for some, it holds a number of annoying acquaintances.

CHALLENGE

During a courtly gathering, a shugenja from another family strikes up a conversation with one of the player characters. His name is Mukachi, and he explains that his hobby is divination. After a few minutes of small talk he offers to tell the character's fortune.

FOCUS

During the divination session, Mukachi claims that his own future is highly compatible with the character's future. He suggests that they support each other as much as possible in order to benefit from this harmonious coincidence. While this may sound like a harmless gesture of friendship, Mukachi is quite enthusiastic about their "unbreakable partnership." He begins following the character around at all hours, asking him for advice and trying to be helpful in return.

STRIKE

Besides his skill in divination, Mukachi brings no useful skills to the party. In fact, his low stamina, lack of combat skills, social ineptitude, and unlucky nature may even hold the character back from time to time. As the winter drags on, the player character must decide how he will deal with the hindrance his constant companion has become.

Two points that can significantly change the way in which the players react to Mukachi (or Mukachiko, if you prefer) is the shugenja's age and gender. An older NPC may be treated with more respect by some players, while others may show more leeway to a younger and more inexperienced NPC. Likewise, a female NPC can often avoid trouble in situations where a male would be scorned. Know your players' habits and you can create an NPC which is likely to bring out the initial reaction you desire.

Of course, prophecies are much more interesting when they are true. If the targeted player character manages to get rid of Mukachi somehow, you can have the shugenja come into some good fortune which allows him to aid the player character later on. If the player character sticks it out and accepts Mukachi as a companion, their continued association eventually allows him to develop skills and abilities which let him aid the player character in a vital situation later on.

This scenario can also be used to introduce a new player character into the party. If so, you may want to eliminate signs of weakness and incompetence from the new character, and instead have him plagued by rivals, social conflicts and family problems. These can cause trouble for the party while still allowing the new PC to be a viable member. After all, you wouldn't want the party to try to get rid of a new player.

Keep the people you don't like close. Keep the people who really get on your nerves closer.

41. Forgive and Forget

Today's Winter Court scenario was originally going to be about finding strange allies in unexpected places. However, a recent rash of dabblings in thread necromancy have given me unexpected inspiration. So instead, we turn our imaginations to examine what may happen when words are not forgotten.

CHALLENGE

While at Winter Court, one of the PCs makes an unfortunate and inadvertently humorous social blunder. While the incident is quite embarrassing, it is thankfully minor and quickly forgotten.

FOCUS

Or at least it would be quickly forgotten if not for the wagging tongue of a court dandy named Yukio. The smiling courtier seems to think that the character's mistake is the most humorous story he has ever heard, and he delights in bringing it up again and again. It quickly becomes his favored joke, and any time the two are in the same room the character can expect Yukio to ask "Hey, do you remember that time you..."

CHALLENGE

As long as the story remains in the public mind, the character's image will suffer. And as long as Yukio is left to his own devices he will continue circulating the story. There are, of course, several ways to deal with Yukio. He could be told of an even juicier incident, reasoned with, stoically ignored, slandered to the point of losing all credibility, threatened into silence, or even silenced permanently. In the end, it all depends on what kind of person the character is deep down, and how he or she deals with mistakes.

If you do not want to role play out the initial scene that involves the target PC's social mistake (or your players are smooth enough to avoid making such mistakes), you can rule that the incident in question occurred at a different Winter Court when the character was much younger, perhaps during their initial meeting with Yukio. This bit of history can also be helpful in establishing feelings of rivalry toward Yukio, as his infuriating retelling of the same old story has continued since their youth.

Alternately, you could make Yukio's motivation much more malevolent in nature. Perhaps he is jealous of the character and his stories are his way of lashing out. He might be using the character's blunder as a joke in an attempt to make himself more popular. Or Yukio could be trying to ruin the character's reputation for other reasons. Maybe he's even working in tandem with another person within the court to set the character up for further manipulations.

One thing to keep in mind is to refrain from making Yukio's comments too overtly insulting or offensive. As long as his stories are true and delivered in a light, off the cuff manner, the character in question should have no real justification to seek vindication. Of course, if you decide that Yukio's true intent has been to goad the character into a duel all along, you can make his comments as biting and spiteful as you wish.

Be careful what you say (or write, for that matter). It may be brought back for all to see someday later.

42. Child's Play

Today saw snow (or frozen rain at the very least) in Osaka, and flurries in several locations throughout Japan. It made me glad to know I had a warm home to return to, and I hope all of you can enjoy the same luxury. Of course, this type of severe weather is exactly the sort of thing which forces samurai to choose between braving the elements or braving the Courts. For those who are lacking in social graces and political connections, Winter Court can be a fearsome place, but it is also a place where new alliances can be made.

CHALLENGE

While attending Winter Court in the palace of another Clan, a player character receives a mysterious message from an unknown source.

Esteemed samurai,

First, let me say that it is a great shame that your prowess and skill are not appreciated by the emissaries that dominate the palace this season. Your power, wisdom, and integrity are a credit to your Clan, and I believe the Empire would benefit if there were more samurai of your caliber.

At the risk of being overly direct, I would beg your assistance in a matter of great importance. A despicable villain stalks the Court, plotting some evil mischief. Although I have gathered a small group of magistrates to monitor his activities in the hopes of foiling his plans, our numbers are small, and his depravity boundless. If you could lend us your strong arm and keen insight, it would be both a great help and a huge honor.

Although I cannot yet risk revealing my presence to the scoundrel and his cronies, I will send a servant to meet with you tomorrow afternoon and explain the situation in greater detail. I hope you will choose to aid me in this matter, and look forward to working with you.

May the Fortunes watch over you this night.

The Judge

FOCUS

The next day, the character is approached by a young girl named Mari. She explains that she is a student of "the Judge," who has asked her to relay his directions while he coordinates with other magistrates in the Court. She expectantly asks if the player character has decided to aid the Judge in striking against evil and corruption, and does her best to secure an affirmative answer.

If the character agrees to help, Mari reveals that the suspect is a man of low character named Toshihide. While his smooth tongue and careful manner allow him to enjoy a good reputation in the Court, the Judge has reason to suspect that Toshihide is not as honorable as he seems, and he would like the PC to seek out evidence to that end. Mari volunteers to help, pointing out Toshihide and giving basic information about him.

After a few days of observation, it becomes clear that Toshihide is not a nice fellow. He is abusive to servants, drinks and gambles with ronin in secret, tries to seduce married women, and lies profusely. However, his skill in navigating the Court and hiding his misdeeds allows him to avoid any negative consequences of his actions.

STRIKE

In truth, there is no "Judge." Mari is the only other member of the investigation. She founded the "secret group" for the sole purpose of tormenting Toshihide. Two weeks ago, Toshihide carelessly stepped on one of Mari's dolls and broke it. When she complained, he teased her until she cried, embarrassing her in front of a large crowd. Vowing to embarrass him in the same way, she formulated a plan and quickly sought out allies who could serve as her voice in adult society. Once she and the PC have observed enough of Toshihide's behavior, she will "accidentally" let slip some of his misdeeds in public. With the PC's testimony to back up her claims, she figures she can finally expose Toshihide as the snake he truly is.

This adventure idea is best suited for a character who is less socially adept than others. While a courtier with several allies and acquaintances in their web of contacts has little to gain from entering such an alliance, a bushi with few friends in court may be more tempted to take whatever support he can find.

Furthermore, Mari can actually become a useful ally to the player character in her own right. She is cunning and resourceful, and quick-witted enough to keep her ears open for news that may be important. Her age gives her a great deal of leeway in the Court, and those who dismiss her as a mere child do so at their peril. While not as overtly powerful as an ambassador or emissary, she can give aid to those who befriend her.

This scenario can also be useful as a change of pace from conspiracy driven campaigns. Players who have read all about the Kogatana, Gozoku, and Black Lotus may think they know all the secrets in Rokugan. Presenting them with a plot to expose the "vile crimes" of a single dishonorable courtier, masterminded by a little girl, should turn any preconceived ideas they might have upside-down.

43. The Gifted Poet

There are only a few shopping days left until the holidays. Are you ready? And while the holidays we celebrate are not observed in Rokugan, the custom of gift giving is no less important. In fact, it may be even more vital for one to find the "perfect gift" when honor and glory are on the line.

CHALLENGE

The famous poet, Yukishima, has just finished a new collection of poems, entitled "Winter Memories." This is the fourth set of poems Yukishima has composed over the last fifteen years, completing the set he started with "Spring Wishes," and continued in "Summer Dreams" and "Autumn Regrets." To honor this great occasion, the host of Winter Court has announced three days of feasting in Yukishima's honor.

FOCUS

Yukishima is a celebrity in courtly circles and the completion of his greatest poetry series is an auspicious occasion. Many dignitaries and members of the court have brought gifts of congratulations to offer at the feast. Yukishima is famous for his practice of refusing gifts with appropriate haiku poems, and many members of the court are looking forward to seeing how he will respond when presented with unique and exotic gifts.

Needless to say, if the PCs do not prepare a suitable gift for Yukishima, their reputation will suffer most severely.

STRIKE

The feast begins and a schedule is drawn up for the presentation of gifts to Yukishima. Unless the PCs do something to change their position in line, they are scheduled to give their gift to Yukishima on the second day of the celebration.

On the first day they watch as many gifts are given, met with poems of refusal, offered again, refused with new poems, offered a third time, and finally accepted. If they pay attention, they may notice that Yukishima tends to react less favorably to gifts that have had little thought put into them, or gifts that are similar to gifts he has already

received. As the first day's festivities eventually begin to wind down, a samurai from another Clan approaches Yukishima and offers his gift. It is almost identical to the gift the PCs have selected.

The PCs have one day to decide what they will do in the face of this new development.

The similarity of the other samurai's gift to the gift the party members have selected may be coincidental, or deliberate. If they have a rival who seeks to discredit them in court, their plans may have been overheard by a spy and their ideas stolen. The samurai might be a desperate individual who latched on to the first good idea that caught his ear. Or it could simply be bad luck.

If a player wishes for his or her character to be a fan of Yukishima's previous works, you can let them make a Storytelling (Poetry) skill roll to recall some details. And if a player tries to compose a haiku poem of his or her own, by all means, encourage them to do so. Yukishima is a genuine lover of the arts, and appreciates even the simplest offering of talent (but not quite enough to waive the need for a present).

HAIKU SAMPLES

As a bonus for over-worked or under-inspired GMs, here is a selection of haiku poems you can use for the adventure above. They are arranged in sets of three, as any properly educated samurai knows enough to refuse a gift twice before accepting it.

Don't forget to save one set for the present the player characters eventually give!

HAIKU SET 1

I seek not your gifts.
I wish only to delight,
And brighten your heart.

Your kind words alone
Are present enough for me.
Your words and your smile.

Generosity:
In this virtue, you give all
A great example.

HAIKU SET 2

You lend me your ears,
Appreciating my words.
I could wish no more.

In truth, I owe you.
To hear a dear friend's laughter?
Worth a hundred gifts.

Sincerely you give
This wonderful gift to me.
My thanks to your house.

HAIKU SET 3

A sword fit for a king,
As powerful as your Clan.
A waste in my hands.

This fine blade you give
I must turn away, I fear,
Lest I seem too keen.

Your gift honors me.
Though I am far from worthy,
I humbly accept.

HAIKU SET 4

A thing of beauty
Shines with the light of Heaven.
Far too fine for me.

This gift before me,
Fit for a prince or hero
Not one such as I.

You stand before all,
Your heart as pure as your words.
How can I refuse?

HAIKU SET 5

And if you want to show your players how Yukishima reacts to a gift that is lacking in thought or is too similar to a present he has already received:

Offer naught, my friend.
Worry not for simple things.
Your warm thoughts suffice.

Nay, again, I say.
Please be seated and relax.
It is no bother.

If it brings you joy,
I will accept this token
And give you this poem.

44. Under Pressure

I hope this week's installment finds you all happy and well. It's all too easy to become overwhelmed by the pressures and demands of the holiday season, and remembering to relax and enjoy yourself can be more difficult than it seems.

Which is all the more reason to spend some quality time gaming with your friends.

CHALLENGE

An influential courtier from the Otomo family approaches the characters in private. He offers them great favors and rewards if they agree to help him, but he insists that they swear an oath of secrecy before explaining further.

FOCUS

The courtier is worried about his son, Shigeki, who is behaving strangely. He fears that Shigeki might be possessed, tainted, cursed, drugged, acting under coercion, influenced by the Lying Darkness (if it has been revealed in your campaign), the victim of an abduction and replacement scheme, or even brainwashed. He asks the characters to investigate without causing a big scandal or disrupting his son's duties.

STRIKE

The cause for Shigeki's strange behavior is a completely mundane one. His duties in the courts have been extremely stressful as of late, and the extra work has caused him difficulties with his family. Feeling like he has been assigned an impossible task, and unable to seek comfort at home, Shigeki is in the early stages of a nervous breakdown.

If the party learn of this and inform Shigeki's father, the courtier is grateful and bestows upon them the promised reward. However, if the PCs go the extra step and try to help Shigeki deal with his personal problems (without overstepping the bounds of etiquette, of course), they may also gain a permanently grateful ally in the courts.

Keep in mind that psychology is only a rudimentary science in Rokugan, and society encourages samurai to deal with their feelings in a completely different manner than we are used to. While the effects of pressure and isolation on morale are understood, methods of coping with those problems are not. A samurai must control his emotions, even if they threaten to tear him apart.

If you want to add a more dramatic element to this tale, you can combine Shigeki's normal stress with one of the other possibilities listed above. Perhaps his work in the courts is being monitored by a criminal overlord who is threatening to blackmail him unless he performs certain tasks. Or a rival might be lacing his evening tea with drugs to cause horrible nightmares, disrupting his sleep. He could even be battling a manipulative yokai for his very soul!

BONUS PLOT HOOKS

Editor's Note: Akodo Akira provided an excellent post on a possible solution or further complication for this adventure.

Geisha.

Geisha were the people that Samurai went to talk out their problems. There were no psychologists, but there were great listeners. And you paid in advance, in gold, and always had references.

Heck, just getting the poor guy an invitation to a geisha house, let alone a private meeting, would be an adventure in and of itself. Possible plot hooks:

- The geisha is inexperienced.
- The geisha has a steady client who is resentful of the new client.
- The geisha is a glutton for attention, and demands more and more of his time.
- The house is suffering financial difficulties and needs more clients, regardless of the needs/wants of the geisha.
- The boy falls in love with the Geisha. (Marriage troubles anyone?)
- The geisha is a spy for [insert faction here].
- The father thinks the geisha is a spy for [insert faction here].
- The geisha wants to become an official concubine or even a spouse and ruthlessly pursues that.
- The geisha house also hooks samurai on opium, and the poor boy gets hooked.
- **Ninja geisha!** (Not Lying Darkness, just a shinobi.)
- Oni geisha?

45. Beauty and Wisdom

In his remarks on last week's scenario, the esteemed Akodo Akira managed to unwittingly guess the theme for this week's scenario. I speak, of course, of those most beautiful and graceful creatures: geisha.

Now, before we get into the scenario, there is one thing I must clear up. I admit it's a pet peeve of mine, but I absolutely must insist that people who speak of geisha understand one basic fact.

Geisha are NOT prostitutes!

A lot of people think geisha are paid to provide such services, but that is a misconception. And those who claim otherwise are doing nothing but spreading ignorance. While the two professions may appear similar, they are, in fact, completely different.

Now that we have that out of the way, we can get have a pleasant evening of delightful entertainment.

CHALLENGE

While staying at the Winter Court of another Clan, one of the player characters (or someone close to the player characters) is introduced to Yumi, a charming and intelligent young geisha. While the other geisha present are popular for their beautiful songs and dances, Yumi specializes in the art of conversation, and has thus been overlooked by most of the guests.

FOCUS

If the PC spends any time talking to Yumi, it becomes clear that the girl is wise beyond her years and has a keen understanding of human behavior. After listening to a person's problems she is able to offer a solution and provide the right words of encouragement to motivate the listener to put that solution into motion. If given a chance to use her skills on behalf of the party she can prove an invaluable source of advice on many topics.

STRIKE

Of course, such frequent meetings with a geisha will not go unnoticed, and Winter Court is a breeding ground for gossip and rumors. If subtle hints and hushed whispers are not enough to get the point across, eventually other members of the character's family will confront him directly and pressure the him to "curb his desires." Whether the character (or Yumi herself) harbor any such feelings is irrelevant—in Rokugan, image is all that matters.

Will the character choose to save face, or continue to benefit from Yumi's wisdom?

Some players may be slow or wary to act on Yumi's advice. While this is their choice, you can move things along by offering them a Free Raise on any rolls they make when taking an action she has suggested. This should give even the most reserved character a reason to seek her out again and again.

If the character who meets Yumi does not become close enough to her that he has to choose between his reputation and her advice, it is possible for one of his rivals to do so instead. Or she may find another samurai who appreciates her intellect, giving him advice that leads to success after success in the courts.

Of course, if a lasting relationship should blossom between the character and Yumi, there are a wide range of other problems. The coming spring will mark an end to their meetings, as the character's home is far from the geisha house where Yumi lives. And even if they were to continue meeting each other, it could never work out...could it?

In the courts, even beauty and wisdom are weapons. Do you have what it takes to resist them? To wield them?

46. A Matter of Recognition

The days are getting longer and the weather is getting warmer. Spring can't be far off. Have you attended to all your business at Winter Court?

CHALLENGE

A peasant servant who has served one or more of the characters (or their family) faithfully for many years approaches him and pleads for a favor. Although it is not his place to make requests of a samurai, he is quite distraught and begs the character to at least hear his story.

FOCUS

The servant explains that his daughter is pregnant with the child of a samurai from another family. If the child is not recognized by the father it will grow up as a heimin, or a ronin at best. But if the father accepts the child as his own then the baby's future will be assured. Although the servant's daughter has asked her beloved to recognize the baby several times, he has yet to do so.

STRIKE

The servant asks the character to tell the entire court that the samurai in question has fathered the child his daughter is carrying. He hopes that by bringing the matter to a head he can force the samurai to recognize and accept the baby. As he lacks the social status to make the claim himself, the servant places himself at the mercy of the character if he will do this deed in his stead.

Depending on how difficult you want to make this scenario, you can give the samurai in question much lower Status and Glory than the PCs, or much higher Status and Glory. Depending on the way in which the PCs break the news and the samurai's reaction to it, a number of serious political events could be set into motion. Remember that in Rokugan testimony from someone of higher Status always trumps the claims of those with less influence.

Of course, your players are free to come up with alternate ways of accomplishing their goal. Bribery, blackmail, negotiation, compromise, and persuasion are all viable alternatives to making a big scene in the court, each with their own good points and bad points.

If your players are comfortable being placed in difficult situations and mature enough to deal with matters of romance, you could also try using one of them as the target of this scenario. If so, you may want to have the servant ask the other PCs to convince the father to accept the child, as players can often resent being forced to do something.

Never a dull day in Winter Court...

47. Broken Trust

Today's scenario is a new twist on an old favorite. While the "tragic accident" and "difficult choice" are well established in previously published material, the politically charged atmosphere of Winter Court allows for any number of deliciously evil twists and turns.

Feel free to put on the pain. It's all part of the fun.

CHALLENGE

While at Winter Court, a visiting lord brings one of his prized possessions to show the host. As the host is a fan of fine arts, he is quite impressed with the unique treasure, a porcelain vase decorated with a floral design that was painted by the grandmother of the Kakita daimyo, and asks the visiting lord to display it in a location where everyone can gaze upon its sublime beauty.

FOCUS

During the course of their stay, the characters happen to witness a young courtier clumsily bump into and knock down the vase, causing it to crack. The courtier is the son of another visiting lord from a different family, and he flees before anyone else sees what he has done. The incident occurs quickly, and few (if any) other members of the court are present to witness what happens.

STRIKE

When the owner of the vase discovers what has happened he demands that the host of the Winter Court take responsibility for failing to keep his precious heirloom safe. He claims that he would never have brought the vase to display if he knew that proper measures to protect it were not going to be taken, and goes on to point out that, since the host was aware of the vase's importance, his failure to keep it safe is a clear lapse in duty.

If the PCs help defend their host or reveal the young courtier's secret they will spare the host further trouble.

If the PCs say nothing they can save the young courtier and his family from shame and embarrassment.

If the PCs find some other way to settle the problem they may end up making a number of new allies or enemies.

It's their choice.

One way to make the decision even more difficult for the characters is to give them a number of opportunities to interact with and get to know the various personalities involved. It's one thing to accuse a courtier you have never met in order to shut up an old man you barely know. It's something else completely to choose between two friends when you know you will have to betray one of them.

Of course, the player characters have most likely been through tough decisions like this before, and will no doubt deal with this one in stride. Alternately, player characters being the cunning and capricious beings they are, they may take a completely unexpected course of action (such as using magic to repair the vase, or framing a rival who was completely uninvolved). If this happens, you can keep the action moving by remembering that Winter Court is a place filled with clever and ruthless people seeking political gain. An "eyewitness" may step forward to implicate one of the characters. Or other members of the court may become involved through bribery or blackmail. Which is sure to cause a scandal. Followed by an accusation. Followed by a counter-accusation. Perhaps even leading to a challenge?

And even if the matter of responsibility is decided, what then? Will the groups and individuals involved remain angry and bitter with each other, or will they be able to "pick up the pieces?"

No one ever said being responsible was easy.

48. The Play's the Thing

It's been a long winter, and we've had many adventures together. We've seen a wide variety of horrors, surprises, and wonders. We've gone through a number of courtly CFS scenarios, sharing both good times and bad.

Of all the challenges we've encountered, this one is my personal favorite.

CHALLENGE

The host of a large and mixed Winter Court, Akodo Minoru, proposes a game to pass the time. A devout fan of the theater, he asks his guests to perform various dramatic scenes from well-known plays for everyone's enjoyment. He makes it clear that acting skill is in no way required—the game is just for fun and an unskilled but spirited performance will be sufficient.

FOCUS

As the schedule for the performances is being drawn up, Minoru asks the player characters if they would present the story of his illustrious ancestor's final duel. The story's climax, featuring Akodo Shujin's death at the hands of Kakita Tairitsu, has been the subject of many famous plays, and Minoru would like it to be performed for all to see.

STRIKE

Many versions of this warning tale exist. Some sources say that Shujin was defeated because he had been weakened by a Scorpion rival's poison. Another version tells of how a Phoenix shugenja was hired to put a curse on Shujin to cause his loss. One rendition claims that Shujin's foolish pride led him to challenge a superior opponent, while yet another says that Tairitsu took unfair advantage of a loophole to set the conditions of the duel against his opponent.

As the night of their performance approaches, the player characters must choose which version they will present.

As always, feel free to change the Clans and identities of the NPCs involved. Depending on the families Shujin and Tairitsu come from, you may wish to come up with other versions of the story. Perhaps Shujin was a wise old Mirumoto who allowed his younger opponent to win. Or maybe Tairitsu was a tainted Crab who used maho to secure his victory.

You can also use the court setting to make the decision rougher on the players. Everyone loves a story where their Clan is presented in a favorable light, but negative portrayals can draw ill will and anger. Even those who are not vilified may have something to say about the way their ancestors are presented on stage, and there is a thin line between "naive youth" and "clueless buffoon."

One final option for added fun is to have your players actually act out the scene as they perform. You can have them go for a full rendition, or let them simply recite the lines they will speak. The story and script, of course, are up to them to decide, with all the responsibility that such freedom entails.

It's like I've always said: Noh theatre is good theatre.

(Editor's Note: *I can't believe he went there. Anyway, here is a website suggested by the esteemed Isawa Nazomitsu for researching Noh-Kyogen theatre: <http://www.ijnet.or.jp/NOH-KYOGEN/english/english.html>)*

49. Keep Your Enemies Closer

Those of you who live outside Japan may or may not be aware that tomorrow is the day of the Setsubun festival. The main event of the festival is a ritual to drive out the evil spirits that have accumulated in the household over the long winter. Some participants wear oni masks, while others throw dried beans at them and shout "Good luck, come in! Oni get out!" It's really quite fun and interesting.

Thus, in recognition of Setsubun, I hereby declare February to be Oni Month at CFS of the Week! Yay, oni!

CHALLENGE

An ally or superior of the PCs asks them for help on behalf of an old friend. She explains that Inoue Sadahiro, a minor vassal of the Asahina family, has gone into hiding. Over the past six months his only communication with anyone has been to send out a call for capable and resourceful samurai. Naturally, the PCs fit the bill, and she would like them to give her friend Sadahiro whatever aid they can. Although she does not know the nature of Sadahiro's dilemma, she can give them directions to the village where Sadahiro is staying.

FOCUS

If the PCs meet Sadahiro and agree to help him he explains that he is the victim of a dark curse. Thirty years ago, his grandfather, the magistrate Daimon, defeated a hated rival. Mad with rage, the rival swore he would have revenge by wiping out every member of Daimon's family. Over the years, the killer systematically hunted down and butchered Daimon and his kin. Sadahiro, his wife, and his unborn child are the only surviving members of his line.

All is not lost, however, for Sadahiro has a plan. He has found an ancient ritual called the Rite of Hospitality. Designed to secure and preserve peace in the days before the kami, the ritual prevents an individual from committing violence against anyone whose hospitality he has accepted. Sadahiro has already retained the services of a shugenja to perform the ritual and bless a cup of sake on his behalf. All he needs the PCs to do is track down his rival, lure him back to Sadahiro's home, and trick him into drinking the blessed sake. If they do that, the curse will be broken and the killer will be rendered forever unable to harm Sadahiro or his family.

STRIKE

The individual who swore to extinguish Daimon's family line is none other than the infamous Oni no Toketsu, the Demon of Blood and Bile.

Feel free to make Oni no Toketsu as threatening as you wish. It may be possible for the PCs to slay it through conventional means, or it could be nigh impossible to cause the monster any lasting harm. If the PCs do destroy the monster before the ritual is complete, Sadahiro may be safe for a while, but eventually the oni will return from Jigoku to complete its vengeance. In which case it may also decide to pay the player characters a visit for old times' sake.

Another way to make the scenario more difficult is to give the oni an idea of what Sadahiro has planned. While your typical slaving oni may or may not be open to the idea of a drink before tearing out your liver and feasting upon it, Oni no Toketsu could have enough sense to avoid anything he is offered. Do the PCs force the sake down his throat, or do they find another way of "showing hospitality" and try to cast the ritual again?

And do they remember to have the sake blessed in their own names as well?

"Good luck, come in! Oni, come in! And have a drink too!"

Editor's Note: *For more information on the Setsubun Festival, check out: <http://www2.gol.com/users/steve/setsubun.htm>*

50. My Word Is My Bond

This week marks the fiftieth installment of Challenge-Focus-Strike of the Week. To mark that milestone, we're going to have an extra large, extra intense adventure seed today.

I hope you brought your best armor.

CHALLENGE

The player characters, as well as several of their friends, family members, rivals, and other notable members of the community are invited to visit the home of Lord Ueshima and participate in a ritual of blessing. Ueshima is a member of the Emerald Magistrates, and is quite influential in the politics of his Clan, so a ceremony at his home is considered quite the social event. His home sits on a high hill overlooking the farming village he oversees, and is built like a fortress. Stories tell of how the building was besieged three times by bandits, and how the defenders were able to hold out against superior numbers each time.

It is, of course, impolite to bring weapons or spell scrolls into the home of someone who has invited you to such a ceremony. Those who arrive with swords on their hips will be politely offered the services of Lord Ueshima's armorer, who is quite adept at polishing blades. Shugenja are also advised to relinquish their scrolls and talismans to Ueshima's shugenja for purification, as a recent assassination attempt by a band of maho-tsukai has left the magistrate suspicious of spellcasters.

Upon entering the main hall, guests are met by Lord Ueshima's son, Akamaru, and his second-in-command, Shouichiro. They explain that Lord Ueshima went to the next village to personally escort the shugenja who will perform the blessing through the valley, and is expected to return some time in the afternoon. The characters are invited to mingle with the other guests and relax until lunch is served. This should give them enough time to get to know everyone else present.

FOCUS

Lunch is served at noon in the main audience chamber of the central building, a spacious room overlooking a small garden. All of the guests and most of the household's staff gather to enjoy an extravagant meal which has been specially blessed to fortify the body and harmonize the spirit in preparation for the ceremony that will be held afterward. Several of the older guests are gossiping away, while young mothers try their best to keep their children from bothering their neighbors. The soft sound of a musician's flute can be heard over the din of conversation that fills the room, and servants bustle about with trays of food and pots of tea.

Indeed, the scene is so peaceful and normal that everyone is taken completely by surprise when the oni leaps forth and grabs Akamaru's beloved bride, Moemi!

The oni lifts the girl by the throat and threatens to snap her neck unless the castle guards promise to abandon their weapons, sit down, and remain seated. With several paces separating the samurai from the oni, there is no way Shouichiro and his men can save the girl before the oni makes good its threat. Reluctantly, they comply with its demands. No sooner have they done so than a squadron of the oni's spirit slaves (see below) appear, gathering the weapons and disarming any other guests who might try to resist. The oni retains its grip on Moemi's throat, using its poison (again, see below) to cause her to cry out in pain. Only after it has coerced her into promising not to move does it release her to join Akamaru, who has sat through the entire scene in a kind of paralyzed shock.

As lunch comes to an abrupt end, Lord Ueshima's samurai, servants, and guests, including the player characters, have all become hostages.

STRIKE

Once the estate is secured and its spirit slave guards are in place, Oni no Kyohaku introduces itself and issues its demands. Although it first recites them to Akamaru, it goes to the main gates to repeat them when Lord Ueshima returns. It asks first for nearby Engyoji temple to be completely cleared of all holy items and religious trappings. Once this is completed, it calls for several maho-tsukai who are being held captive and awaiting sentencing in nearby villages to be freed and escorted to the temple. Finally, it forces Lord Ueshima (and any others it can threaten into complying) to enter the abandoned temple and let the maho-tsukai bind their names to oni. If this is done, Oni no Kyohaku promises to let all remaining hostages leave unharmed. Otherwise, the demon makes no guarantees.

In between negotiations with Lord Ueshima, the oni spends its time manipulating and torturing the other guests for its own enjoyment. The PCs and the other hostages are given freedom to move throughout the living quarters and the main audience chamber, but the oni's spirit slaves patrol the other areas of the estate, making access to the armory and barracks difficult. While it is possible for small groups to gain some degree of privacy, the oni and its guards are seldom far away.

Outside, Lord Ueshima is powerless to do anything, lest the oni slay his son and his honored guests. His only recourse is to attempt to bargain with the oni for either a more acceptable offer (which is not likely to happen, as the oni holds all the cards) or for more time. The hostages inside can do even less, for they are completely at the oni's mercy. The oni need only bide its time and wait. If its demands are met, Oni no Kyohaku will have gathered itself a number of mortal slaves and several oni servants, which will only further its reign of terror. If its demands are refused, the oni will still be able to slay a number of helpless mortals, causing chaos and despair. It's a win-win situation as far as the demon is concerned.

Unless something can be done to foil its plans.

Once the situation is established, there are several ways you can take this adventure. You can let the characters attempt to slip away and sneak around the fortress looking for weapons or some way to evacuate the other hostages. Of course, Moemi has already promised not to move, and Akamaru will be loathe to leave without her, but no one ever said it would be easy.

You can put them in the role of negotiators, trying to find and exploit a loophole that the oni did not expect. Through quick thinking and fast talking, it is possible they could find a way to use the oni's own power against it.

If they keep from causing any direct trouble, Oni no Kyohaku might even dispatch them to help Lord Ueshima complete the preparation of Engyoji temple (under suitably powerful oaths to return, of course), giving them a chance to help plan a siege. If you're feeling particularly kind you can even have the oni let them go without making any kind of vow. After all, it still has their families in its clutches.

One point to be wary of when running this adventure is to keep the players from feeling as if they are powerless to do anything. While the oni is cunning and powerful, it can and should make the occasional mistake. It may forbid a samurai from using his sword, but forget to levy a similar restriction against his courtier companion. It may accept an old woman's promise "not to walk through that door," but neglect the possibility of that same woman being carried through by a heroic player character. And while the oni will try to secure promises of non-interference from most guests before it leaves for its talks with Lord Ueshima, it cannot possibly predict everything that the PCs might try while it is absent.

The lack of initiative or creative thinking shown by the spirit slaves is another weakness that the player characters can exploit in their struggle against the oni. A command not to let anyone leave a room says nothing of people entering. Slaves who have been ordered to "attack anyone with a weapon" may not realize the destructive capabilities of a serving tray until it is too late. A daring and clever group of players should be able to find something to do, if you give them the proper opportunities.

The situation may seem hopeless, but dark times are when heroes shine most brightly.

Of course, player characters being the consummate heroes that they are, your group may go the exact opposite route. The shugenja with Fires that Cleanse as an Innate Ability, the bushi with Crab Hands, and the ninja with hidden weapons might just decide to rush the oni straight on. If they really feel this is a good move, let them go for it. Oni no Kyohaku is smart enough to keep human shields within handy reach, and completely without regard for other living creatures. The heroes may win the day when all is said and done, but Oni no Kyohaku will be sure to send a number of their friends and loved ones to the grave before it is driven back to Jigoku.

One last note on the timing of this adventure: The socialization that takes place between the Challenge and Focus stages is highly recommended, as it gives the player characters a chance to sympathize with their fellow guests when the oni attacks. If the various NPCs you gather are seen as nothing more than nameless extras, your heroes may not feel any obligation to rescue them. The beginning of the Focus stage, however, has a lot of action that does not involve the PCs directly, and may cause some players to get bored. If you think this may be a problem, you can deal with things in media res, cutting directly from the time just prior to lunch to the point where Oni no Kyohaku has gained control of the building and revealing in the details of what has happened as you go along. If you feel really dramatic, you can start the action at the Strike stage, filling in all of the background later.

ONI NO KYOHAKU

Known as "the bargaining demon," Oni no Kyohaku appears as a tall, slender man with pale skin and yellow eyes. Its facial features are slightly elongated, causing its nose and ears to come to sharp points, and its completely hairless head is crowned by seven short horns. If the oni wears a hooded robe or wide brimmed hat, it can pass for human under cursory inspection. Its long fingernails appear bright red, and its tongue is completely black.

The oni's Traits and Skills may be adjusted depending on the Rank and abilities of the party. Its mental Traits and Social Skills are quite developed, making it more than a match for any courtier present. Its physical attributes are more geared toward speed than brute strength and stamina, but if pressed it will be more than able to put up a fight. Its most terrifying weapon, however, is the uncanny power it holds over the minds and hearts of its victims.

THE POWERS OF ONI NO KYOHAKU

MASTER AMBUSER: Oni no Kyohaku's only real combat ability is its incredible speed, which it uses to get the drop on opponents. You can express this ability either by giving the oni the Combat Reflexes advantage, letting it roll and keep any number of extra dice for initiative rolls, or simply dictating that the oni always has the option to go first in a combat round.

Of course, the oni prefers to take hostages or hide behind non-combatants rather than face enemies in a straight fight. After all, what's the advantage in fighting with honor?

MIND READER: Oni no Kyohaku is able to read the emotions and surface thoughts of individuals nearby. It uses this ability to determine what buttons to push when making a threat or offering a deal. Keep in mind that while the oni is unable to read anything more than a target's emotional reactions or immediate intentions, it is a master of psychological manipulation. It has a great deal of experience in dealing with mortals and generally knows what to say or what type of questions to ask in order to get victims to think about their plans, fears, or desires.

POISONED GRASP: Oni no Kyohaku is able to inject a poison into victims through its claws. Although a single strike cannot deliver a sufficient amount of poison, anyone who is grappled and held by the oni will suffer its effects. While the poison is not lethal, it causes extreme pain and agony, increasing in severity the longer the victim is exposed. Assume that the oni is able (if it so wishes) to make an automatic Anatomy (Torture) skill roll against anyone it grapples, gaining a Free Raise with each subsequent round. As with its Mind Reading ability, Oni no Kyohaku uses this power to force uncooperative victims to accept the bargain it offers.

BINDING OATH: Oni no Kyohaku's most feared ability is the incredible influence it holds over those it speaks with. Any promise or bargain made within 100 yards of the oni is rendered inviolate. The speaker is not made aware of this enchantment when the oath is spoken, and even if the speaker or the oni move out of this range the effects remain. Only the death of the oni or complete fulfillment of the bargain end the oni's hold over the target (which is why the oni prefers agreements which last indefinitely to those that require a single action). If a character attempts to break the promise he is struck by a flash of incredible pain, effectively bringing him to the Down wound level until he stops resisting. Those who defy this power repeatedly are struck dead (although the oni can, at its discretion, simply render such victims unconscious). The oni is also affected by this power, and will always attempt to ensure that any promises it makes have no negative consequences for itself.

Some bargains that the oni might offer include:

- "Do what I say and I'll put down the child."
- "Break your sword and I'll stop hurting your daughter."
- "If you promise not to attack me, I promise not to attack you."
- "If you swear to obey my orders, I'll let a fellow prisoner of your choosing leave this place."
- "I'll spare this man's life if you tell me what those bushi over there were planning before I came in this room."
- "If you can cut off your own leg, I promise not to harm your family. Otherwise, I make no guarantees."
- "You can have medicine for the wounded, if you give one of them to me."
- "Kill that woman. Then I'll let these others go free."

Note that while the oni is likewise bound to honor the promises it makes, it is not above twisting the spirit of such agreements. For example, in the case of the first bargain listed above, the oni may tell the target to stand motionless for the next 10 minutes, put down the child it is holding, and then, having fulfilled its part of the bargain, pick the child back up and devour it.

Note that a good way to reveal the unbreakable nature of promises made to the oni (if you choose to do so) is to have one of Shouchiro's guardsmen from the Focus section of the adventure outline above attempt to break his oath to remain seated. Letting the PCs watch the poor man writhe in agony while the oni chides him for breaking a promise should give them an idea of its powers.

SPIRIT SLAVES: The price for breaking a promise made in the oni's presence doesn't just end with pain, however. Victims who die as a result of the Binding Oath power are forced to serve the oni in death. Oni no Kyohaku may summon the ghost of any character killed in such a manner and press them into service. There is no chance for a spirit slave to resist, for they are unable to take any actions besides those dictated by the oni.

By the time the adventure begins, Oni no Kyohaku has already trapped the spirits of thirty samurai from across the Empire (give or take, depending on the power level of the party), which it will summon as soon as it has secured a hostage and forced the guards to lower their weapons. If the PCs try to engage a spirit slave in combat, assume it has the stats it had in life. Again, you will want to adjust the School Ranks of the spirit slaves the party faces depending on how much of a challenge you want them to present. In most cases, the fact that spirit slaves are fully armed and armored while the player characters are clad merely in kimono should be a sufficient deterrent. If you want to drive things home even more you can give the spirit slaves a Free Raise on any attack roll they make against an opponent who is unarmed. Or, if you want to give the PCs a break once they get their weapons back, you can give any character who is using a proper weapon a Free Raise on attacks against the spirit slaves. This makes the oni's guards fearsome in the early stages of the adventure, but gives the player characters a chance to turn the tables later on.

If killed, a spirit slave is dispelled and cannot be summoned until after the next sunrise. The only true way to give such tortured souls peace, however, is to slay the oni.

OTHER ABILITIES: If you feel your party needs more of a challenge, you can give Oni no Kyohaku spellcasting abilities similar to those of a shugenja, Shadowlands Powers, or even techniques from one or more Courtier schools.

Wow! That was a whopper! I hope you enjoy this extra special installment of Challenge-Focus-Strike of the Week as much as I've enjoyed the challenge of writing it. Oni are one of the signature monsters of L5R, and I tried to make this one as menacing and threatening as possible while still offering a unique type of adventure scenario with more punch to it than "an oni attacks a village." If you go all Die Hard on its butt and take it down hard, more power to you! If you end up getting your elderly uncle eaten somewhere along the way, well, you were warned.

51. The Oni's Prison

The Month of the Oni continues, bringing even more carnage and destruction. Armed with great strength, incredible size, powerful abilities, and the blessings of Jigoku, oni are capable of causing massive amounts of damage.

Sometimes, this is a good thing.

CHALLENGE

The party is summoned before an elderly and esteemed shugenja. The shugenja is either a member of their Clan, a former officer in the organization to which they belong, or simply someone who has reason to trust the player characters. The shugenja starts the meeting with a barrage of questions, asking about the characters' willingness to protect the Empire even at the cost of their own lives, and what they know of the dangers of the Shadowlands. At last, she gives them a jade spike about the size and shape of an ox's horn. She explains that the spike is a powerful artifact that has been handed down to worthy protectors through the ages. She entrusts it to the party to do with as they will, but warns them never to use it unless there is no other course of action.

There are three lines of symbols carved around the base of the spike. The first two are indecipherable to anyone not trained in the history of magic, but have something to do with blessings and bindings. The last line, however, can be clearly read by anyone.

BY THE FLESH BOUND WITHIN, I SUMMON YOU. BY THE PURITY OF JADE, I COMMAND YOU. SAISEI, HEED MY CALL.

FOCUS

If the player characters ever become desperate enough to use the jade spike, they witness a gruesome spectacle. Tiny pieces of skin, flesh, and bone fly through the air, racing toward the party from far away. The bits of flesh adhere to the base of the spike and clump together, forming a misshapen body that gradually becomes larger and larger. Before long, the body of Oni no Saisei becomes fully formed, revealing a four-legged centaur-like beast with four arms, two reptilian tails, and a gaping mouth like a shark. The oni stands four meters high, and has two rows of sharp spikes running down its back, including the jade spike from which it was originally called.

The oni obeys the commands of the character who held the jade spike before it was summoned, and will fight or perform other tasks on his behalf. Although it is a ravenous, violent creature, it is completely unable to harm or threaten the character in any way while the jade spike retains its enchantment. This protection may be extended to anyone the summoner names as an ally, but constant attention is required to keep the oni from striking out at any targets that present themselves.

Although the oni is able to regenerate any normal injuries, the jade spike affixed to its back is a constant source of damage. Eventually, the injuries become too severe, and Oni no Saisei melts back into the ichor from which it came, leaving only the jade spike behind. Once it has died in this manner it may not be summoned again for a full day.

STRIKE

The spike is actually a piece of the oni's flesh encased in jade. Because Oni no Saisei's regenerative powers prevented him from being killed in the normal manner, a ritual was enacted upon one of the spikes broken from his back, turning it to jade. As long as the last piece of the oni's body remains sealed in jade the monster will be unable to regenerate fully. Each time the oni reforms it suffers damage from exposure to the jade, which eventually causes it to melt back into sludge. However, the incredible power of the oni's taint is slowly wearing down the effectiveness of the jade. Each time the oni is summoned the jade becomes a little more tarnished and black. One day the jade will melt away from the broken spike completely and Oni no Saisei will be free once more.

Maybe the oni can be summoned many more times before it becomes dangerous. Maybe it will break free the very next time it is called. There is no way to know for sure. All that the party can be certain of is that controlling the power of the oni is their responsibility.

For a party that is normally used to fighting oni, the chance to use one against their enemies may be quite tempting. On the other hand, you may find your players hesitant to call upon a source of power that could cost them their lives and their very souls. Both lines of thinking can bring about some excellent role-playing opportunities.

If necessary, you can press the issue by placing the PCs in situations where using them must choose between calling upon the oni or facing a threat that is more immediate. Whichever course of action they choose, they will have to accept and deal with the consequences of their choice.

And if they do call upon oni one time without suffering any ill effects, why not a second?

Calling upon an oni when things become difficult is certain to have political ramifications, however, even if the PCs act for the right reasons. The PCs may find themselves accused of crimes against the Empire if they are not careful, and even if such claims cannot be substantiated they are certain to have a negative effect upon their reputations. Another point that may draw unwanted attention is the nature of the jade spike itself. The magic that was used to encase an object in jade, and the spell binding the oni to the will of the spike's holder are unknown throughout the Empire, and shugenja will want to examine and study the magic for their own purposes. Furthermore, the potential for using the oni as a weapon of destruction is certain to make an impact on any who know of its existence. Thieves may attempt to steal it. Generals may command the party to use it in battle. Inquisitors may try to destroy it. And rivals may decide that it is too dangerous to leave in the hands of the PCs, seeking either to gain it for themselves or nullify its power. Even if the PCs never call upon the oni at all, the spike may still be a source of great danger.

Oni may be troublesome opponents, but they are even more distressing allies. Next week we'll wrap things up with another festival and a good old-fashioned slaughterfest.

52. Baby Dolls

Oni Month started with a festival, so it is only fitting that we end it with one as well. Many families here in Japan are already preparing for Hinamatsuri, the Doll Festival. It is an especially important festival for young girls, who often dream of growing up and meeting a handsome man to marry, just like the Empress in the traditional display.

Of course, things don't always end so happily...

CHALLENGE

As the city where the player characters are stationed prepares for the Doll Festival, a merchant begins selling ornately crafted ceramic doll sets. The beautiful dolls she creates are quite popular, and soon become the talk of the town. Almost every family aspires to buy a set, and with prices running from inexpensive to extravagant there is hardly a young girl in the city without at least one of the merchant's new dolls for this year's festival.

If any of the PCs have a young daughter, sister, niece, or cousin, they will notice one of the merchant's dolls on the display stand in their home. Otherwise, a well-connected PC may receive one as a gift from a friend or admirer.

FOCUS

On the eve of the festival, the player characters are awakened in the middle of the night by a crash and a shriek coming from the main chamber of their estate. It turns out that one of their servants has accidentally knocked over and broken the largest doll, revealing an underdeveloped (but still living) oni fetus sleeping inside!

If the other dolls in the set are searched, they are all found to contain gestating oni. Depending on your mood, some of these oni may even have matured enough to survive and fight after being discovered.

STRIKE

Although dawn is fast approaching, most of the city is still asleep. There is not enough time to find and visit everyone who bought a doll set from the merchant, and the early hour makes spreading the news difficult. The characters must act quickly, lest the Doll Festival be marked by a gruesome slaughter, and it is up to them to choose what they will do and who they will save first.

One way to add more drama to this scenario is to have the player characters be visiting another person's home when the doll containing the unborn oni is discovered. Not only does this cut down on the amount of time they have in which to act, but it also makes the danger a lot more personal. Their home might be all the way across town, and any number of problems could delay them as they rush to save their loved ones. Do they investigate the screams from a house they pass along the way, or continue on their mission to save their own families?

You could even leave the doll unbroken, giving the player characters no advance warning of the danger that is waiting for them. Whether they are at home or not, the sight of small yet dangerous oni bursting forth from the dolls should shake the PCs up quite a bit.

Once the crisis is past, this adventure can also be expanded by assigning the party to search for the merchant who created and sold the dolls. Who or what is she, and why did she strike in this way? Why would anyone attack young girls? Is this a random act of violence, or is there some method to her madness?

If you want to be especially devious, you can make this event the first stage of an invasion attempt by Pekkle no Oni spawn. Perhaps only certain homes received dolls with oni inside. While the characters run around warning every household they can find, the oni in other homes break free, slay the children of important figures, and assume their identities for some nefarious purpose.

Editor's Note: Take a look at this website for examples of hinamatsuri dolls: <http://japanese.about.com/library/weekly/aa022501a.htm>

Challenge, Focus, Strike!

Adventure Hooks for Legend of the Five Rings

VOLUME V: CFS OF THE WEEK #53 THROUGH #65

Written by Jsawa Nazomitsu (Scott Stockton) • Compiled & Edited by Pirate Spice (Sean C. Riley)

Foreword

Following is the fifth volume of a series of documents collecting the esteemed Isawa Nazomitsu's "CFS of the Week" feature in the L5R RPG GMs section of AEG's gaming forum (www.alderac.com/forum).

For the sake of further organizing these, I have attempted to give each hook a title (also taking inspiration from suggestions on the forum). The hooks themselves are presented in the order that they were originally posted, edited for brevity and typography.

– Sean C. Riley (a.k.a. Pirate Spice)

53. Cultural Exchange

The next product on the L5R RPG release schedule is the highly awaited new book about creatures, nonhumans, and monsters. As such, I'll be presenting a number of nonhuman-related scenarios over the next few weeks to highlight the many ways in which such characters can be used in adventures (besides cannon-fodder for insane bushi, that is).

One thing to keep in mind when using this adventure and those that follow in later weeks is that they can be applied to almost any type of nonhuman or non-Rokugani society. If you are not a fan of naga or rattlings, you can easily replace them with kappa, kenku, or zokujin instead. Or you could use Yobanjin raiders or Burning Sands nomads. Just about any type of outsider is appropriate, and the final choice depends on the type of campaign you want to run.

All cross-cultural encounters begin somewhere. Our first begins with chance meeting.

CHALLENGE

While traveling through a stretch of deep forest, the party comes across the comatose form of a naga. The naga has been gravely wounded and left for dead by some attacker, most likely a Shadowlands creature. In addition to his wounds, the naga has also been poisoned. He will most likely die unless he receives some sort of medical treatment, and his condition does not allow him to be moved until he has had at least a day of rest.

FOCUS

If the player characters decide to give the naga treatment it is easy enough to bind his wounds and fight the chills that the poison causes, and even an unskilled character should be able to do something to ease his pain. The naga wakes up after an hour or so. Upon seeing the party, however, he becomes visibly panicked. He gazes at them with eyes filled with fear, and clutches a light blue scroll to his chest defensively. To make matters worse, he does not know any Rokugani words.

If the player characters attempt to leave without helping the naga or react with hostility, the naga regains his senses just long enough to mutter a few words in an unknown language and press the scroll into their hands before he lapses back into unconsciousness.

In either case, the player characters must deal with someone with whom they cannot fully communicate.

STRIKE

The naga is a messenger, delivering an important message to an ally in the Doji court. If the player characters aid him, they may gain the thanks of both the Naga people and the Crane Clan. Even if they do not save his life, delivering the message in his stead will earn them a measure of gratitude from both parties. On the other hand, if the party had anything to do with his demise, they may be treated to a rather cold reception.

If the player characters left the naga in the woods without doing anything, they are approached by a second naga a few weeks later. Unlike the previous naga the party encountered, she is a shrewd courtier and speaks Rokugani quite fluently. She tells the PCs that she has reason to believe they passed through the area that her missing clutchmate (akin to a sibling) was traveling in, and asks if they have seen him. She is quite worried about his safety, and doesn't know what she would do with herself if anything were to happen to him...

This scenario is especially useful for introducing a nonhuman character into the party. If you are looking for a way to explain why a naga would travel with a group of human samurai, perhaps it is because he owes them his life. Or maybe he recognizes that the human lands are too dangerous to travel through alone, and follows the player characters around for protection.

If you really want to make things realistic when dealing with an NPC who doesn't know what the PCs are saying, try to avoid making too many direct leaps of understanding. Pointing to oneself for "I" and pointing to someone else for "you" is quite basic. But miming the action of swinging a sword around can be interpreted in many different ways. It could mean "sword," "to fight," "battle," "soldier," "violent," "survival of the fittest," or even "he wants to play the game with the stick and ball." So go wild with the misunderstandings and let your players spend some time working out how to get their message across. They'll thank you for it later.

54. Guess Who's Coming To Dinner

This week we continue our foray into the realm of cross-cultural encounters. Having gotten past the shock of their initial meeting, both parties will undoubtedly want to learn more about each other. And while this "getting to know you" stage is rife with awkwardness, it also holds enormous role-playing potential.

Let's meet our new friends, shall we?

CHALLENGE

The player characters are called to help a minor functionary named Tokuko, who serves the governor of the province in which they live. She explains that an important guest is coming to visit the area in preparation for diplomatic talks. Although the governor would normally oversee such an auspicious event by himself, other urgent matters that demand his attention have recently come up. As such, responsibility for the tour has fallen onto Tokuko, and she would consider it a great personal favor if the party would serve as aides and escorts during the visit. She also hints that the governor himself is certain to appreciate their assistance.

The guest is expected to arrive within the next few days, and although Tokuko has already drawn up an itinerary for the visit she is open to any suggestions that the player characters might have. Due to the last-minute change in plans, Tokuko has been given only limited information regarding the visitor. While she knows the guest is named Shishya, she sheepishly admits that she does not know which city or province he (she?) is from, or what types of things he is interested in.

FOCUS

When the day of the visit arrives, Tokuko and the player characters are greeted by a shocking sight. Shishya is not human! The governor's friend is a naga! Only after seeing the reactions of his staff does the governor realize that he forgot to mention this detail. Nonetheless, he gives his unusual guest a warm greeting and leaves him in the capable hands of Tokuko and the player characters.

The Shishya, who has come in good faith, speaks Rokugani passably, but has little practical knowledge of human customs or society. Still, he is eager to see and learn as much as he can and attempts to strike up conversation with any party members that seem friendly.

STRIKE

The tour that Tokuko has planned for the Shishya includes several potentially troublesome stops, such as a visit to a temple and tea with the abbot, a stroll through the marketplace, and a demonstration by a puppet theater troupe, before returning to have dinner with the governor and his family. If the visit goes smoothly, it may lead to a beneficial alliance with the Naga. If the visit is unpleasant, the Naga may withdraw, or even react with hostility. In either case, the outcome will have a large impact on the prosperity of the region, to say nothing of the rewards or consequences that the PCs may find themselves faced with.

It all depends on how well they can play host to a snake.

As with last week's adventure, this scenario can be adapted for a number of different types of visitors. Boisterous gaijin, exotic shapeshifters, ancestral spirits from the Empire's ancient past, or even a sheltered noble who has never set foot outside his own estate could all provide a challenge for the tour guides...er, heroes.

Don't forget that the sight of a naga (or rattling, or bipedal fox, or blond Westerner) is going to cause a great deal of ruckus. This can be minimized somewhat if the Shishya is female naga with legs, but details like clothing, eye color, and hair color are sure to be noticed in a society like Rokugan. And even if no one reacts violently, the Shishya is likely to be disappointed if everyone he or she meets runs in fear.

While it may be tempting to have the Shishya commit blunder after blunder and let the player characters deal with the resulting mess, an equally challenging possibility is to make the naga visitor incredibly curious about Rokugani society. Describing traditions and cultural practices so that they can be understood by a complete outsider is no easy feat, and questions such as "Why does that man turn away the other? Can he not see that he is hungry?" or "Why does everyone obey the one called 'Daimyo'? Is it because he is the strongest warrior? Or the wisest scholar?" have no easy answer. Still, if the player characters try their best, they just might be able to explain things clearly and win the Shishya over.

Making new friends is an exciting prospect, but only if you have the courage to take the first step.

PIRATE SPICE'S SUGGESTION

This situation could be even further complicated with the presence of a rival of the daimyo (or an ambassador from an unfriendly province), who might use the appearance of the naga as an opportunity to sow embarrassment.

AKODO AKIRA'S SUGGESTION

Include a rival of the governor who knows of his friend and his friend's identity. This rival greatly fears what will happen if the Naga assist his rival or become trading partners (let alone allies!)...and he has a plan.

He sends in several operatives (on this, or especially later visits) to cause the meetings to go poorly. These operatives can incite the peasants, arouse the interest of passing Kurioban and Witch Hunters (especially if the Naga are still really rare), and generally cause mischief. They may not (or may) stoop to causing injury, it's up to you. Their main goal is to get the naga to be disgusted (or worried) and leave.

To kick it up a notch: the operatives do try to assassinate the naga (or a samurai and blame the naga) in order to start a war with the naga and the governor.

BAYUSHI MIFUNE'S SUGGESTION

One thing nobody has brought up is the motivations of the naga ambassador. A lot would depend on how much of a known quantity the snakes are in your campaign, but the naga could be a spy sent to discover just how much of the ancient Naga Empire the "monkeys" have taken over, or to gain an estimate of human military potential. Combining this idea with some of the other posters ideas could lead to very murky and political scenario with multiple factions struggling for the upper hand, with the poor characters stuck in the middle.

55. What's Yours is Mine

We continue our cross-cultural journey this week with a scenario about deeper understanding. After all, you can't really decide whether to like or hate someone until you really know them, now can you?

CHALLENGE

The PCs are assigned to take a band of samurai guards and heimin laborers into a remote valley. Their orders are to secure resources in preparation for the construction of a new village, and ideally their efforts will pave the way for further expansion into the area.

Shortly after establishing themselves, however, the PCs discover that a naga border patrol has also entered the valley. Their objective is the same as that of the player characters—to gather supplies, build basic structures, and make things ready for more naga to move into the area.

FOCUS

It doesn't take long before the two groups come into conflict. The humans begin harvesting lumber from a forest that the naga use to protect their settlements from the wind and rain. The naga divert a river to provide water to their egg beds, cutting off the humans' water supply. More and more arguments break out as the two groups vie for limited resources, and tensions run high. Both sides dispatch diplomats to deal with the problem, but talks drag on and little is achieved. Indeed, the diplomats themselves

almost come to blows when a crystal mine is discovered nearby and both groups lay claim to it.

STRIKE

While the politicians are still discussing matters, a small army of Shadowlands creatures is sighted near the entrance to the valley. Although the monsters in the horde are not particularly strong, their numerical superiority gives them a great advantage over both the humans and the naga. The crystals in the mine would even the odds, but neither group is willing to give up a such a precious resource. With the Shadowlands threat looming ever nearer, both the humans and the naga see control of the crystal mine as vital for their continued survival, and neither will brook any interference.

Unless the player characters do something, both sides will likely waste time and energy fighting each other. If that happens, the chances that either the humans or the naga will survive the subsequent Shadowlands onslaught are slim.

This scenario works equally well for parties of human characters or naga characters. Indeed, a flexible GM could even run two groups of players through the adventure at the same time, letting them try to outwit, outmaneuver, or out-negotiate each other. In this case, you might want to emphasize the necessity of securing resources. There's only so much to go around, after all, so why let some strange outsiders take what you need?

While the traditional happy ending to this sort of story involves both groups learning to overcome their differences and work together, there are numerous other ways for the scenario to play out. The characters can try to hold out against the Shadowlands creatures on their own, or withdraw their forces completely and return with reinforcements once the danger has passed. One group could try to buy off the other with promises of money or aid. Or they could just as easily try to eliminate their rivals in one sudden and decisive strike.

And even if the two groups do work together to deal with this common enemy, what will happen once the threat is over? Will they be able to maintain the peace they have found, or will old arguments resurface once again?

Editor's Note: It should also be noted that this scenario could work equally well with rival clans.

56. Equal Rites

There are many challenges when it comes to meeting someone from another culture. Opening a dialogue, finding common ground, coming to understand each other, and dealing with differences are all rife with difficulties and opportunities for trouble to arise.

Yet even after you learn to treat someone with kindness and friendship, it can be a long time before you really, really accept them.

CHALLENGE

An emissary from the naga arrives to sign an important document and finalize a formal agreement with the lord of the province. The document in question could be a treaty, trade agreement, formal recognition of borders, or even an alliance. Whatever the nature of the agreement, it is of great importance to both parties, who have gone through a great deal to see their people come together in peace.

If your players have gone through the scenario from two weeks ago it's possible that the naga representative could be their old acquaintance, Shishya.

FOCUS

As the details of the document are being finalized, one of the lord's advisors steps forward to inform him of some bad news. The law states that only a samurai who is of legal age may sign binding agreements on behalf of his family or Clan. While the naga are not human, they must still submit to the Empire's laws if they wish to be recognized as allies, and in light of this news it would seem that the pact cannot be completed.

STRIKE

If the player characters do not step forward with a plan, the naga makes the first move and approaches them. He asks if the party would assist him in undergoing the "gem-pu-ku" ordeals. He has achieved a basic understanding of Rokugani society, and will dedicate himself completely to learning the basic skills. All he lacks is someone to teach him about culture...

...and etiquette...
...and heraldry...
...and theology...
...and bushido...
...and history...
...and law...

While it is technically possible to change the law, Rokugan is a land of stability and tradition. To allow one special case invites other exceptions, and adhering strictly to the letter of the law reduces the chance that the agreement will be overturned in the future. Furthermore, simply granting the naga representative samurai status would be an insult to all samurai who have gone through gempukku before. The rights and responsibilities of adulthood are not given—they must be earned.

Depending on the strengths of the player characters, you can adjust the naga emissary's weak points to make the scenario either easier or more difficult to deal with. He might have a knack for remembering points of etiquette because they are so different from his own culture's manners. Or he could have difficulty remembering what all the different mons and strange symbols mean. He could be completely unused to martial skills, as the duties of his caste do not call for such activities. Or he might be a seasoned warrior - but have trouble judging how much he needs to pull his punches when fighting someone who is not connected to the Akasha. Including a mix of problems can keep your players on their toes and encourage them to try different solutions.

Finally, there may be other problems as well. When Shishya first arrived on the scene, Pirate Spice, Akodo Akira, and Bayushi Mifune offered some excellent ideas for complications that may arise during a naga ambassador's visit. Many of them may also apply to this situation. Not everyone is going to react positively toward the idea of negotiating with the naga, especially if it involves granting one samurai status in the process!

57. Stranger Among Strangers

In teaching someone about your own culture, you cannot help but learn about their own. When both sides make the effort to understand each other, a solid bridge of friendship can be built.

Of course, it's not always easy. So far we've seen how guests may face difficulty in our culture. Now it's time to see how well we fare in theirs. For you cannot truly understand the plight of an outsider until you have been one yourself.

CHALLENGE

In the course of their adventures, the player characters are afflicted with a curse or disease. The ailment is not overly debilitating, but it is inconvenient enough to interfere with their daily lives, and it resists all attempts at treatment. Furthermore, it threatens to grow worse with time if nothing is done.

FOCUS

A temple in a nearby naga settlement has a fountain inside which may be able to cure the affliction, as all who bathe in its waters are cleansed and blessed. However, the temple is protected by ancient wards which prevent all non-naga from entering the temple. Not even the most powerful jakla can break the enchantment, for the magic is as old as the naga race itself.

STRIKE

Legends tell of zokujin and kenku who became part of the community and were admitted into the temple during special ceremonies. If the player characters moved to the settlement, adopted the local customs, studied the teachings of the Akasha, and embraced the naga way of life, it is possible that they could be recognized by the protective spell and allowed entrance. Then, if their intentions are pure, they might find the cure they seek.

The exact length of time and level of devotion necessary to gain entrance to the temple are up to the GM. If you want to make things easy, the PCs may be allowed into the temple after living in the area for a week or two and making friends with a few members of the community. If you want to give your players more of a challenge, you can require them to gain a much deeper understanding of the ways of the naga. Simply going through the motions of the rituals may not be enough - appreciating the meaning of each word and action might be necessary.

Of course, you'll want to give the players some other challenges to face to pass the time. Besides studying naga culture, they'll also have to make themselves useful in the community (which means learning a trade and getting a job), learn to get along with their neighbors (who may not be open to the idea of humans living among them) participate in rituals and festivals (even though they have no connection to the Akasha to guide them), and defend the settlement against all dangers.

And don't forget that they're supposed to be living as naga while they do all this. Performing a kabuki play at a ritual feast may make them popular, but they might do even better to learn and recite a traditional

epic poem in nagash. Being welcomed (or even tolerated) as a guest is one thing, but being accepted into naga society completely is another matter entirely.

58. Trapped Like Rats

We continue our "Countdown to the Creatures Book" with more adventure scenarios about Rokugan's nonhumans and cross-cultural encounters. This month we take a look at those famed rodents of unusual size: the nezumi.

The naga, with their group mind and limited exposure to human customs, retain a culture that is quite foreign to that of Rokugan. Nezumi, however, come from an entirely different situation. When their civilization fell they lost a great deal of their cultural identity. Further, centuries of living on the edge of human lands have had an influence on their lifestyle and customs. Any dealings they have with Rokugani are not so much cross-cultural as multi-cultural. Yet even when such similarities are apparent, it is often the differences that stand out the most.

CHALLENGE

The party is subdued and captured by a tribe of angry ratlings. While the ratlings attempt to use their superior numbers to pressure the PCs into surrendering, they are willing to fight if necessary. The ratlings use nets, traps, magic, and other methods of non-lethal combat to attack the group, and are quite well-prepared. Once the fight is over, the PCs are bound in ropes, relieved of their possessions, and taken to a nearby camp. The ratlings are quite thorough in securing the PCs and take more than adequate steps to prevent their escape.

FOCUS

After a day or so of rough treatment, the characters are brought before the chieftain to stand trial. The tribe has suffered greatly at the hands of humans, who consider them little more than vermin. As such, they have taken to attacking any humans who approach their camp. While many members of the tribe cry for blood, there are just as many who would rather ransom the party to the local daimyo in exchange for a guarantee of being left alone, and several who wish to have nothing to do with humans altogether. Over the course of the trial the chief listens to all sides, as well as any rebuttals the player characters may have.

STRIKE

The player characters must somehow convince the ratlings that they deserve to go free. While all of their current equipment is forfeit, they may bargain with other goods, promise any concessions they can make, plead, argue, threaten or intimidate the ratlings as they see fit. However, the course of action they choose will have a great influence on how the tribe perceives and deals with humans in the future. Even if the party goes free, there is no guarantee that there will be no further trouble later on.

Because players seldom react positively to having their characters robbed, tied up, and slaughtered, you may want to mitigate any death sentences that may occur to something less permanent. The party could be left tied up by the side of the road without any equipment or even beaten into unconsciousness and dumped in a ditch. Either way, the nezumi will be satisfied with their victory over the humans even if it does not involve blood.

Likewise, allowing PCs to hide or "lose" important items such as heirlooms and treasured possessions in a place where the nezumi will not find them will go a long way toward keeping your players happy. Or, if you want to encourage more rivalry, you could make it possible for them to track the tribe down and attempt to get their gear back.

One point to remember is that while nezumi are not part of Rokugan society they do have a basic idea of how it works. They see farmers toil in the fields, merchants go about their business, samurai march off to war, and nobles idle away their days in courtly pursuits. Any players who think of them as ignorant savages will be in for a rude awakening, for the nezumi are well versed in the tricks that humans use, both martial and social.

And if your players somehow manage to convince the nezumi that they come in peace, wish to be friends, and will aid the nezumi in their struggle to escape persecution? Well, then, more power to them. As long as they remember to act in a manner that upholds their promises. After all, a rat who has been betrayed is a dangerous creature indeed.

Can you make up for a bad first impression? Will you even try?

59. A Helping Paw

Last week we dealt with nezumi who were antagonistic. This week we'll meet some who are simply indifferent. Of course, that's not always an improvement.

CHALLENGE

After a long struggle through hostile territory the player characters find themselves in desperate straits. They might be lost in the wilderness, trapped behind enemy lines after a battle, or even stuck in the middle of the Shadowlands after a scouting mission that went sour. Whatever the case, they are still a long way from safety, and supplies are running low.

FOCUS

After a short time, the party comes upon a small tribe of nezumi who are also traveling through the area. The nezumi are well equipped, with arms, armor, supplies, and provisions to spare. While not openly hostile, the nezumi show no signs of hospitality either. They simply greet the party, ask what they want, and encourage them to be on their way.

STRIKE

The nezumi have the capability to help the party if they so choose, but see no real reason to do so. Their own survival is assured, and they have nothing to gain by aiding the humans. While it may seem cold and harsh, this outlook has served the nezumi well, and unless the PCs can find something the nezumi really, really want they will be turned away and left to fend for themselves.

Finding out exactly what the nezumi want can be difficult, so you may want to drop some hints. If you want to be easy on your players you can have one of the nezumi make an offer directly. Or you can force the players to ask questions and make offers until they hit on the right one.

Likewise, the type of deal that the tribe will accept can vary quite a bit. If the PCs have suitable items to trade, they can attempt to bargain for food and water. If there are some other items that the tribe wants the PCs can promise to procure them. Or they could lie about the marvelous qualities of their "magic" baubles in an attempt to dupe the nezumi into lusting after the contents of their traveling packs. They could teach the nezumi a new skill, or tell them an exciting story. If the nezumi are being plagued by enemies the PCs can offer to fight on their behalf. They just have to make the effort to negotiate and keep trying until they get a good reaction.

Of course, some PCs might choose to forego bargaining altogether and try some other method of getting what they need. If they engage the nezumi in battle they may eventually prevail, but the cost will not be so small. If they try to steal from the nezumi they will mark themselves as enemies, and face retaliation in kind. After all, the nezumi are much more experienced at stealing than they are. And if they look for supplies elsewhere they will have to take the risk that there are no other sources of food to be found nearby.

If you want to expand this adventure you can have the nezumi approach the party for further favors or offers to trade in the future. Having saved the PCs lives it's only natural that the nezumi would seek more tokens of gratitude further down the line, possibly even traveling a great distance and moving their entire camp to do so.

Whether they ask politely or just help themselves, however, is up to you.

60. Of Mice and Men

Nezumi can be quite difficult to deal with at times. They raid warehouses, steal unattended items, and just generally sneak into any area they're not supposed to be. They completely lack any concept of honor.

But they do have compassion for others. And sometimes that's enough.

CHALLENGE

A powerful lord offers great rewards and a position of status and prestige within his court to anyone who can return his son to him. The young boy was lost in the wilderness during a hunting trip some days ago, and his father is desperate to see him returned safely. While hopes are slim, there is still a chance that the boy is alive, and a number of search parties are being organized.

FOCUS

Whether the party volunteers to search the forest or not, they are soon approached by the boy's rescuer. His name is Ik'rik'uk, and he is a nezumi tracker. While he has kept the boy safe and healthy, he is unable to approach the lord's estate by himself. He asks the PCs to accompany him, so that he may enter the human settlement safely and deliver the boy to his father.

STRIKE

There are many samurai (possibly including members of the party) who would consider it unnecessary to keep a promise to a ratling. Such detractors are bound to be quite vocal in their attempts to dissuade the boy's father from making the nezumi one of their peers. The PCs are free to advise the lord as they wish, as long as their decision is one that their honor allows them to live with.

Even if he does not become a member of the court, Ik'rik'uk can still become an ally of the party if they aid him and treat him well. His knowledge of the wilderness is unmatched, and his skills in combat are quite impressive as well. Although he does not follow bushido, he does his best to treat all creatures with kindness, and can be depended on to help anyone in need.

Or, if you wish, it is also possible for Ik'rik'uk to become an enemy of the party. For while Ik'rik'uk is kind at heart, he also has a strong sense of justice. While his motives for saving the boy were noble, any creature is bound to be angry upon hearing that they were discriminated against. He and the other members of his tribe are owed a huge debt, and they have the capability to see to it that the humans pay whether they want to or not.

Whichever option you choose, the outcome of the adventure is certain to have a significant impact on the relations between humans and nezumi in the area, either for good or for ill.

And what of the boy? How has the time he spent living with the nezumi affected him and his perception of non-humans?

This scenario is another good example of how to integrate a non-human character into an adventuring party. Being awarded a position in the court of a human is a great honor, regardless of the responsibility it entails. The humans have abundant food, finely crafted tools, and shiny baubles aplenty. To bring such treasures back to one's tribe is worth any amount of service.

61. Who Framed Raoshu Ratling?

People don't trust nezumi. They think of them as scoundrels and thieves, little more than animals. And while that may be true in some cases, part of getting to know someone well is finding out that such generalizations don't always apply.

CHALLENGE

A group of monks visits a temple located in or near the area where the party is centered. The group of pilgrims includes one very unusual member: a nezumi called Raoshu, who claims to be a student of Shinseism.

FOCUS

The leader of the pilgrims explains that Raoshu was found by members of his temple when he was just a pup. The monks took the orphaned nezumi in just as they would have a human child and raised him as a member of the order. While there were some problems at first, Raoshu has become a devout member of the Brotherhood.

Unfortunately, Raoshu's piety is soon called into question. A number of thefts are reported in the area shortly after the pilgrims arrive. While no formal accusations are made, it doesn't take long before rumors of the nezumi's guilt begin to spread.

STRIKE

The true culprit is a monk from the local temple. Upset at being forced to give hospitality to pilgrims who would accept a non-human as one of their own, he has taken it upon himself to see the nezumi cast out. He believes that Raoshu (whom he calls "that beast") lacks the humanity needed to be a true monk, and will try to sow as much suspicion against him as possible. Unless something is done, the plan is likely to succeed.

If your players are reluctant to get involved, there are some ways you can motivate them. Magistrates are bound by honor to investigate any crime that occurs within the area they serve. Especially pious or honorable characters may be approached for help by the leader of the pilgrims, or even Raoshu himself if he recognizes the tendency humans have to distrust outsiders. And if all else fails you can have the thief target and steal an item from the PCs. Personal loss and a desire to even the score are always great motivators.

You can, of course, change the culprit to suit your own campaign. Perhaps another member of Raoshu's group is jealous of the attention that "the nezumi monk" receives when they travel, and is trying to get Raoshu disciplined. Or maybe the leader of the pilgrims is trying to teach the monks of both temples a lesson in judging people by their hearts and not their faces. Or maybe Raoshu really is having a relapse, and needs help in order to avoid disgracing himself and his teachers.

Finally, if you want your players to also harbor some feelings of unease around Raoshu, there are a number of ways you can make him appear suspicious without actually having him steal anything. Nezumi have different ideas about personal space within the family group - he might approach others too closely or make body contact more frequently than they may like. Or he could be more tactile than normal individuals, and insist on touching almost everything he sees. And don't forget his tendency to stare at shiny objects.

It's tough to be a rat in a world of humans. Nobody likes you when you live by your own rules, and nobody likes you when you try to live by their rules either. But I suppose things could always be worse.

You could be a goblin...

SOME ALTERNATE TAKES BY PIRATE SPICE

I can see a few ways to tweak this CFS for additional twists:

- Raoshu fully realizes that he will be mistrusted, and so keeps himself hooded and disguised as an old man (cane and all, to account for his posture). This will likely add to the suspicion when he is revealed as a "filthy rat."

It's quite possible that there have been similar crimes at previous temples and shrines that these pilgrims have visited, which could mean two things:

- The pilgrims are not pilgrims at all, but ronin thieves who have struck an alliance with Raoshu. They use their cover as monks to infiltrate temples and rob the place blind, while blame is placed on Raoshu (who they are quite confident can escape if trouble starts).
- Prejudice works both ways. Raoshu is being framed, but not by a monk. The pilgrims are being followed by a group of nezumi who are offended at the idea of one of their own being a follower of human religion. They have been trying to raise suspicions around Raoshu in hopes that he will be cast out and they can "rescue" him.

62. Down, Down, Down to Goblin Town!

The Countdown to Creatures Book continues this month, with adventure scenarios featuring goblins of all sorts. I myself prefer the weak, pathetic goblins of old, but there's no reason why you couldn't use this week's scenario with the more powerful goblins that have arisen in recent years. Just don't say I didn't warn you.

CHALLENGE

The party is asked to restore order in a remote and mountainous area. The local heimin have become superstitious in the aftermath of a severe earthquake, and rumors of "evil mountain spirits" rising from the ground are spreading rapidly. Farmers are afraid to leave their homes, and fields are going untended. While the problem is most likely due to the peasants' ignorance, something must be done to assuage their fears and get them back to work.

FOCUS

It is not long before the characters encounter some of the "evil mountain spirits" for themselves. A pack of goblins appears out of the wilderness, raiding the village and stealing whatever they find. The peasants are ill-prepared to face such a threat, and the goblins have become bold enough to venture directly into the village itself in their search for food, where they will cause a great deal of damage unless stopped.

If the party follows the goblins or traces their footprints, they find a large crevice in the mountains.

STRIKE

Simply dealing with the goblins as they come forth from the hole will not solve the problem, as more goblins emerge to take the place of those slain. The recent earthquake opened an underground passage linking the crevice to another cave system. This cave system could be the home of a giant colony of goblins, or it might even extend all the way to the Shadowlands! In any case, the caverns are teeming with goblins, and eliminating them all will take quite some time. It is possible that the underground passage could be collapsed with magic, but one would need to venture quite a ways in to find a suitable spot to do so.

Depending on the area in which you place the village it may or may not be plausible for the caverns to extend all the way to the Shadowlands. If this is the case, you can rule instead that the goblins are part of a colony which has lived underground for quite some time. They may even have adapted to life in the dark. Goblins who strike in the night, use sonar to see in total darkness and have natural camouflage in order to blend in with stone or earth could present a big threat to a group of unwary heroes.

The number of goblins in the caves is up to you, but it should be more

than enough to prevent the party from simply going in and slaying them all in one go. If the PCs do not have access to any means of collapsing the tunnels you can spread the goblins out more in order to give them a fighting chance, but it should still be a major undertaking for them to exterminate every last one.

And they'd better get every last one, because goblins breed like cockroaches...

63. Grubby Little Hands

We find ourselves beset by more goblins roaming outside the Shadowlands this week. Whatever will it take to get them to stay where they belong?

CHALLENGE

A string of robberies hits the city where the player characters are staying. Witnesses tell stories of inhuman figures scurrying across rooftops and melting into the night, sparking rumors of ninja and ghosts. The PCs are either asked to investigate the manner, or approached by someone who wants them to provide security for a warehouse full of valuable goods.

FOCUS

When the player characters finally face off against the mysterious thieves they find the truth is much less impressive than the rumors that are circulating. The culprits are goblins. A gang of more than twenty goblins, in fact. They slip in under cover of darkness, distract (or neutralize) any guards, and quickly make off with whatever they can carry. Surprisingly agile, the creatures do their best to avoid combat, and attempt to flee if discovered. Incidentally, their preferred escape route is through the sewage ditches and garbage heaps.

STRIKE

The goblins are acting under the orders of a merchant named Yasuki Jirokichi, and use the basement of one of his warehouses as a hideout. If the player characters manage to gain access to the building they will find the Shadowlands refugees guarding a trove of purloined treasures and stolen merchandise. Of course, Jirokichi and his sub-human servants are certain to react negatively to anyone they find poking around in the area, and intruders will soon find themselves beset by goblin guards intent on preventing their escape.

You can change the type of mayhem the goblins cause to fit whatever motivation you choose for Jirokichi. Thieves are helpful when your goal is to become rich, but if he wants to secure information they can become spies instead. Or, if he is trying to outshine his rivals (either in the market or in court) in the goblins can be used for sabotage. And there's nothing like having a mob of goblins at your command when you're trying to kill someone.

Jirokichi will do whatever he can to avoid being caught, and will most likely deny any knowledge of the goblins' presence if confronted directly. After all, they're only goblins. He can always get more. And the player characters can be assured that as they were kind enough to remove the unwanted pests from his property he'll be sure to send them an appropriate gift later on...

It's also possible for Jirokichi to have given the goblins some training and education to improve their value as servants. The creatures might be skilled in combat techniques, stealth, or even the ways of disguise! Of course, the fact that they are goblins limits the use they will get out of such training, but it could still give them an edge against PCs who think them no more than unwashed brutes.

If you want to add a further challenge, you can also reveal that certain aspects of the goblins' physiology make them well-suited for their role as thieves. Perhaps their rubbery skin and soft bones allow them to squeeze through tight openings. Maybe they can put on sudden bursts of speed when evading pursuit. Or how about something really weird, like being able to shoot blood from their eyes when threatened?

TAMERLAN'S SUGGESTIONS

One should be sure to have the thieves employ some simple but dishonorable tricks that samurai would never think off, like using improvised mizugusuri (or not so improvised ones...maybe Jirokichi is not a Yasuki, but a Shosuro merchant, or a Shosuro Butei Actor disguised as a Yasuki). Other funny tactics that come to mind is throwing...impure substances at the brave samurai.

If neither the investigation nor the guard request seem viable to introduce the players, they can always be victims of the goblin thieves and have to get back what is rightfully theirs.

If Yasuki Jirokichi is not Yasuki Jirokichi, the whole point of this operation might also be to discredit the Crab. Maybe the Scorpion wishes to free some warehouses that are currently held by the Crab (or whichever clan the goblin master poses to be of), so that their Yogo merchants can move in. Even if they don't compromise their agent (Jirokichi saying he did not know of the goblins), this would still have the Crab look like they can't keep an eye on the warehouses the city's governor entrusted to them.

64. Nature Versus Nurture

Goblins, goblins, goblins! Is there anything those accursed creatures won't foul up?

CHALLENGE

A lone goblin approaches the party under a flag of truce. Speaking roughly accented but passable Rokugani, he asks the characters to grant him mercy. He tells them that he is a scout from the Rotfang tribe, and brings an invitation to parley from his leader.

FOCUS

The Rotfang tribe consists of about forty or fifty goblins, and its leader is a small, wiry goblin called Uulhan. Uulhan explains that he has been inspired by the way humans resist becoming slaves to Fu Leng, and wants to give the same freedom to his people as well. By giving goblins the gift of civilization, he hopes to overcome the cycle of viciousness that life in the Shadowlands breeds and break the dominion that Jigoku holds over their simple minds.

He begs the party to help him, swearing that every member of his tribe is ready to renounce violence and accept human culture into their hearts.

STRIKE

Uulhan's pretty words are only half true. While the goblins of his tribe do want to learn the ways of the Empire, they have no intention of leaving Fu Leng's service. After mastering such concepts as engineering, tactics, medicine, writing, and craftsmanship, they plan to take such knowledge back to the Shadowlands and share it with other goblin tribes. This will give the goblins an advantage in both their struggle to survive the horrors of the Shadowlands and their constant war against the Empire.

Player characters will naturally be suspicious of Uulhan. That's to be expected, of course, seeing as he is a goblin. But Uulhan's a cunning beast, and an excellent liar. He's more than willing to stage opportunities to prove his sincerity to the party, and will do whatever it takes to learn the secrets of Rokugani science and technology. He'll play on the PC's sympathies, pretend to be more or less intelligent than he really is, and even ingratiate himself to those in power as if he were a pet if that is what's required to achieve his goals.

And if things take a turn for the worse, he's also an incredibly fast runner.

Another twist you could put on the scenario is to make Uulhan's intentions completely true. He really does want to lift his tribe out of the muck and bring them some measure of culture. But the bestial nature of goblins and the prejudice against them make this an almost impossible task. Things could be even further complicated if he approaches the party while they are in the Shadowlands. Would they vouch for a group of monsters seeking asylum?

And what ramifications will Uulhan's plan have if he is successful? Whether his words are lies or truth, his tribe stands to gain a great deal of power if they are able to overcome their shortcomings. How will the Empire react to the revelation that goblins are not simply filthy animals and have the potential to achieve much, much more.

You can take a goblin out of the Shadowlands, but you can't take the Shadowlands out of a goblin.

TAMERLAN OFFERS MORE SUGGESTIONS

Now one problem that may arise in this scenario, is that the PCs might not be willing to talk to filthy animals in the first place, ending the scenario in a hack and slay session, before the scenario even begins. I can imagine two possibilities to handle this problem, off the top of my head.

POSSIBILITY 1

If the PCs slay the goblin scout outright, the GM could just keep sending single scouts to the party, to be slain, until the players accept a parley. Of course, knowing nothing about goblins, I don't know if it would be in character to act this way (maybe even having the scouts refuse to defend themselves and being cut down with the resolve of a Shiba Toriiko). Then again the goblins might choose to get rid of any traitors, outcasts or prisoners they have, manipulating their behavior by use of magic or drugs.

POSSIBILITY 2

If this doesn't work or doesn't strike the GM's fancy, the PC group might be captured by the Rotfang tribe (or by someone else and then rescued by them...which could be staged, of course). Or maybe they are even rescued from starvation. This works especially well if the scenario is set in the Shadowlands.

After being prisoners/guests and treated well by the goblins for a while, they may develop sympathies for the creatures (Stockholm Syndrome, anyone?), which would make Uulhan's plan much more workable (no matter if the lies or truth option is chosen).

Another consideration if the goblin's plan succeeds. If they didn't mean to leave Fu Leng, maybe they change their opinion after they gain culture and knowledge, but not the respect and influence among Fu Leng's minions they thought would come with it. Of course changing sides would be much more complicated after they cheated the humans once.

On the other hand, if they wanted to escape Fu Leng's influence, that does not mean they become all nice and cozy with the Empire (they won't get a warm welcome by most after all), so they might well become just another kind of threat to the humans, maybe becoming wandering bandits or what not.

65. The Head of the Beast

Ask any Crab and he'll tell you that goblins aren't scary because of their strength or skill, but because of their sheer numbers. For those who don't scare all that easily, however, something more is necessary.

CHALLENGE

The characters are assigned to protect a small fort or village in a remote, out-of-the-way location. The garrison is small, but the area is defensible, and morale is high among the sentries who have been stationed there, as it is considered one of the easiest assignments possible.

FOCUS

After a few months of peace and quiet, an army of goblins is sighted moving through the area. Although the goblins have numerical superiority on their side, their primitive grasp of tactics and lack of military skill ensure that they pose little threat. None of the sentries see the advancing army as cause for alarm, and many of them even look forward to the break in routine.

STRIKE

Only after the battle begins does it become apparent that this is no ordinary horde of goblins. Their leader is Samang, an extraordinarily large and intelligent goblin warrior. Not only is he skilled in combat techniques, but he has also managed to master tactics and strategy as well. The goblins under his command do not fling themselves into battle mindlessly, but undertake preparations for a siege. Unless the PCs do something heroic, Samang's massive army is almost certain to crush them.

Depending on how powerful your party is, you may want to give Samang extra abilities in order to increase the threat he poses. He could have higher than average stats and skill ranks, Shadowlands Powers, or even have ranks in a school. While the Ogre Bushi or Tsuno Ravager schools would be thematically appropriate you could really use any combination of techniques you like.

While Samang's army of goblins has force of numbers on its side, don't forget that it is still inferior to a comparatively-sized army of samurai. Their weapons are in disrepair, they have little to call on in way of a supply train, and the warriors themselves are untrained. Samang lacks cavalry forces, has little magical support, and will likely be unable to call upon reinforcements. These are all weaknesses that the party can capitalize on if they find themselves in serious danger.

Alternately, you could pull out all the stops and give Samang as much of an advantage as you want, emphasizing the fact that he is as a true Champion among goblin-kind.

It's also possible to move the adventure to a different location if you so desire. Having Samang attack a smaller outpost means that the party will have limited access to resources and manpower, making a fight against a massive army daunting, if not impossible. Stationing them in a larger city will solve this problem, and may even tip the balance in their favor, so you may want to increase the size of Samang's army in order to compensate.

And even if the PCs manage to defeat Samang their troubles aren't completely over. For while cutting off the head may be enough to defeat a human army, with goblins it only means that they will be without guidance as they flail around.