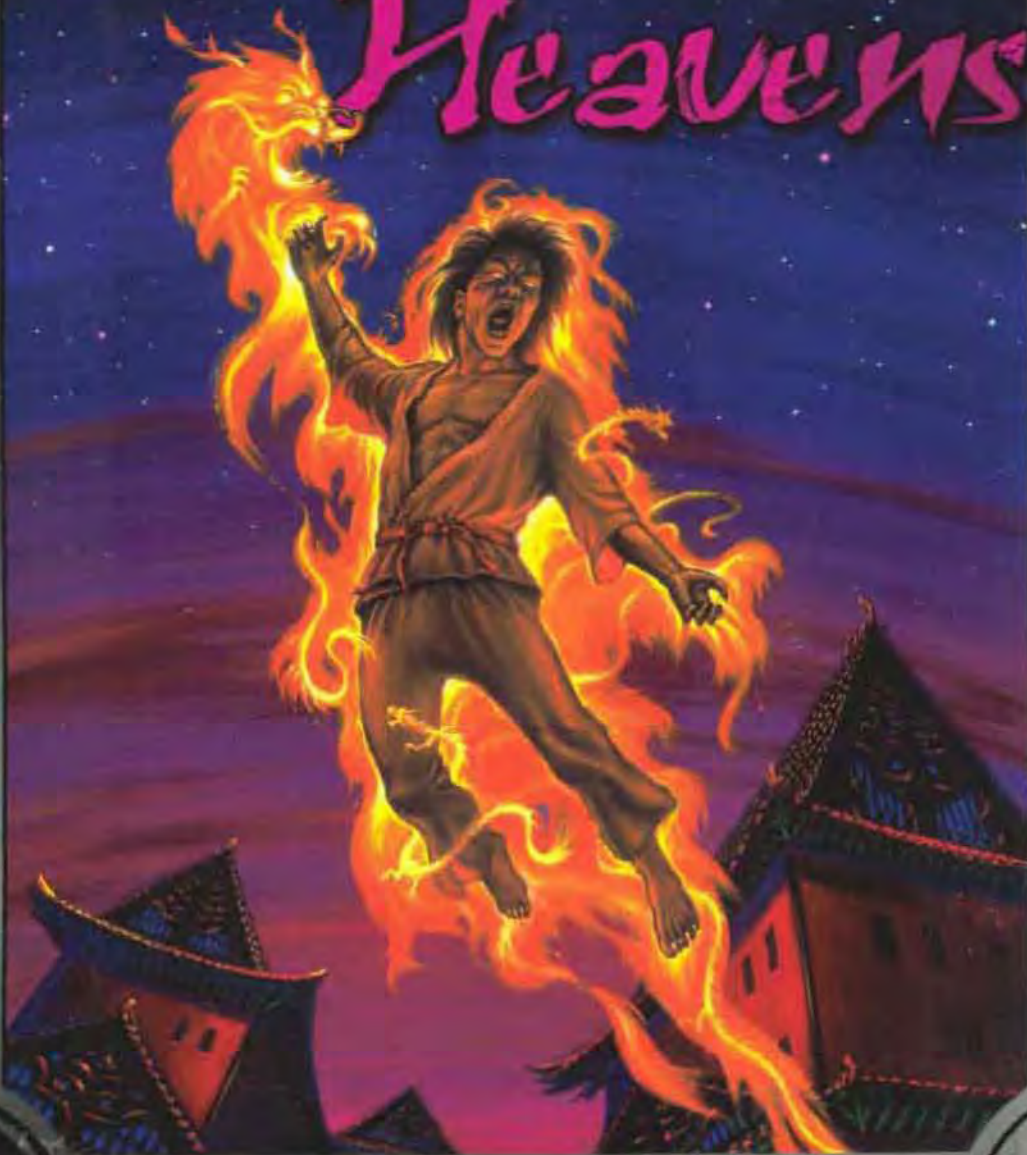




Legend of the Five Rings™

Void in the Heavens™



M-2

High Magic
Series

An Adventure of Heresy and Betrayal



Written by
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Legend of the Five Rings

Void in the Heavens





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Introduction

To serve the divine or obey one's duty? For a Rokugan there are few questions more difficult to answer. The gods by their very nature demand and deserve devotion from mere mortals, even samurai. Yet to be samurai means to live for the traditions of honor, nobility, and class. For the most part only shugenja need concern themselves with such weighty theological questions but today, in this adventure, the player character, find themselves caught up in just such a debate. Only this is more than a theoretical discussion; it is a life and death struggle and the decisions the party makes determine not only their future but that of the entire Scorpion Clan and the Oracle of Fire himself.

The adventure centers around the corruption and fate of the current Oracle of Fire. Ultimately the PCs must make a choice between piety and personal gain, while the very traditions that normally guide them pull in opposite, irreconcilable directions. The choice they make determines the fate of The Oracle and has profound effects upon the Scorpion Clan. As one might imagine, they should choose wisely. The central theme of *A Void in the Heavens* is that "emotions make slaves of us all." A variety of emotions confront the PCs, the Oracle, and the Scorpion Clan, from love and betrayal to greed and hate to hope and fear. The players discover just how powerful these emotions can be and find out whether or not they can control their own feelings instead of giving into them.

Void in the Heavens is suitable for any group of characters. The only requirement is that the party not have any sort of undying enmity towards the Scorpion Clan (at least at the beginning). Before the adventure begins the GM must come up with some reason for the heroes to journey to Kyuden Shosuro for the purpose of visiting the Scorpion Clan. They can be bearing a message from their lord, coming at the request of the Shosuro family on some matter unrelated to the adventure, or even just visiting friends. If the party has already fallen out with the Scorpion clan for some reason, the trip could be an attempt to make amends. The Shosuro family's diplomatic bent should offer a variety of possible set ups. Thus, one fine spring afternoon the party finds itself nearing Kyuden Shosuro, totally unaware of the recent turmoil that has engulfed the castle and its occupants.



Void in
the
Heavens

By
Richard
Dakan

What Has Gone Before

A few weeks ago the Oracle of Fire awoke one glorious spring morning and knew that the time had come. He had lived out his current life on Rokugan and was now ready to pass on the mantle of the Dragon and ascend into the Celestial Heavens. First however came the important matter of choosing a successor: someone whose spirit would prove worthy of the Dragon's immortal presence. Expanding his oracular awareness into the surrounding countryside he found the person he sought in the lands of the Scorpion Clan not too far from Kyuden Shosuro.

The Oracle began a pilgrimage, what would certainly be his last, walking from village to village on his way to find and prepare the new Oracle. Along the way he answered the questions of the locals, base and noble alike, although he



revealed his plans to none of them. However, word spread that the Oracle was on a rare pilgrimage through the area, which piqued the interest of the Scorpion Clan; they had a particularly burning question on their minds, answerable only by the likes of an Oracle. While the Oracle found his successor and spirited her away to a mountaintop cave to prepare for his final ascension the Shosuro family dispatched an envoy to seek out the Oracle's advice and wisdom.

From its earliest days the Scorpion Clan has held the infamous Black Scrolls, protecting their dark secrets from the rest of Rokugan. Recently however other scrolls revealed a terrifying prophecy which foretold the destruction of the entire world. The Scorpion Clan could not trust anyone else with the knowledge because its implications were far too sweeping, implicating the Hantei line itself in the final victory of Fu Leng. The seemingly coincidental appearance of the Oracle of Fire just when they were in the greatest need of divine guidance seemed a sign too obvious to ignore.

Shosuro Shiriko's Supplicancy

The Scorpion Clan sent one of its most capable envoys, Shosuro Shiriko, to ask the Oracle of Fire these all important questions. A skilled negotiator, Shiriko has also spent a great deal of time studying ancient texts about both the Oracles and the Black Scrolls, making her an ideal choice. She and her samurai escort set out to find the Oracle, and a few days later discovered that he had created a temporary home for himself atop a small nearby mountain. Leaving her escort at the foot of the heights, she ascended them to supplicate herself before the Oracle and learn from his wisdom.

When she arrived, breathless and tired from the long climb, she found that the Oracle was not alone in his cave. There with him was a filthy young girl, obviously an eta. Normally Shiriko would not have even noticed the presence of an untouchable except that her presence in the Oracle's cave was so incongruous. Hiding her shock at the girl and trying to avoid becoming ill at her stench, Shiriko focused her attentions on the Oracle. He welcomed her as befit her station but said that he could not answer her questions just now. When she politely inquired when he could, stating that she had very important matters to discuss he replied that he would never answer her questions. He then went on to explain that he was leaving this earth for the Celestial Heavens but that the young girl, the eta, would soon be taking her place.

Although she kept her outward appearance calm and pious, inside a torrent of emotions rushed through Shiriko's mind. How could this be? An eta becomes an Oracle? Surely the Oracle must be joking. At the same time, Shiriko also saw an opportunity, one granted to very few people and one she could not, for her own sake and that of her clan, pass up. In a matter of seconds she formulated and began to act out her plan. As many such quickly enacted plans do, this one led to disaster.

To Love a God

Shiriko began, ever so subtly, to cry, a few tears running down her cheek. The Oracle said that there was no need for tears, that his successor would be able to answer her questions as well as he. She said that was not the reason she wept. She wept because she had lied to the Oracle, that her question was not the true reason she had come.

"What is the true reason then my child?" asked the Oracle.

"I came to you, oh Wise One, for impious, dishonorable reasons. I swore to myself that I would never let anyone know the truth, not even you. I thought that maybe...if you met me, that possibly, somehow..." Shiriko began to cry in earnest, the tears running down her face distorting her carefully applied make-up.

"What is it child, this terrible secret you hide within your heart?" asked the Oracle again. "You can only find relief and forgiveness if you let the truth free from within the prison you have built for it."

Shiriko, who had bowed her head in apparent shame, looked up to the Oracle with tearful eyes. "The truth my lord, is that I love you. Ever since I laid eyes on you years ago I have loved you with all my heart." The Oracle simply stared, dumbfounded by the woman's words and the strange effect they were having upon him. "I thought that by coming to you with a matter of grave import I might impress you, that you might see in me all that I see in you. I know it's foolish, a girlish dream, but I thought that you might somehow come to love me as I love you."

The Oracle's heart soared to hear Shiriko's words. Dragons know nothing of love but in theory. When the Oracle took on the spirit of the Dragon he lost touch with all the emotions he once had as a man. Now however, in the moment of weakness before he gave up his earthly existence, Shiriko's arrow struck true. Emotions long forgotten and repressed welled up within in him and he looked upon the beautiful Scorpion Clan envoy with longing eyes. He felt the connection with the Dragon waver, but he did not care. All other thoughts, all concerns besides this new found love evaporated.





Love and Betrayal

Shiriko had seen that same look many times before in others and she knew that she had snared her prize. She went on to explain that since the love of her life was leaving, she too would end her life. She would commit seppuku here in this cave. Perhaps then she might see him in the Celestial Heavens some day. She drew forth her blade, preparing to end her own life. The Oracle stopped her, confused, but knowing he did not want her to die, that to see her in pain would pain him even more.

Shiriko dropped the blade to the ground and looked at him, eyes still wet with tears. Slowly she walk towards him, her gaze fixed on his. She knelt before him where he sat, never breaking that look. Slowly, hesitantly she leaned her head forward. Unthinkingly, surprisingly he leaned forward as well. They kissed and then fell into each others arms. The eta girl, confused and ashamed, fled the cave. While the Oracle's heart burned with love Shiriko's soared at the prospect that her plan was actually working. She had seduced a god.

The next morning as they lay side by side, Shiriko began to unfold the rest of her plan. Confident that she had him wound tightly in her skein of false love, she began to speak of the future.

She said she had a plan for them to be together in love for eternity. The Oracle can pass on the mantle of the Dragon to her and ascend into the Celestial Heavens as planned. Then she in turn will pass it on and join him for all time. The Oracle, still under love's sway, found this a divine idea, and agreed, saying that once Shiriko passes the mantle on to the eta girl all we be just as he planned except that now he can exist in eternal love with his new bride. Shiriko, still revolted at the idea of an eta Oracle and not thinking at her best, suggested that perhaps a different candidate could succeed her, someone from her own family.

For all love's obfuscating power, the Oracle remained the Oracle and suddenly he saw Shiriko's duplicity for what it was. The love she had awakened in him quickly turned to something much less pleasant: bitter, black betrayal. Shiriko knew at once that she had erred, that she had pressed him too far. While love had been overwhelming in a wonderful way, this new emotion the Oracle felt consumed him uncontrollably. The temperature in the room began to rise at an alarming rate. Shiriko gathered together her clothes and ran for the cave entrance. As she fled down the mountain the peak exploded in a burst of flame like a newborn volcano.

Her escort found her, bruised and battered but alive at the bottom of the mountain. The wrapped her up in fresh silks and mounted their steed to flee the flaming mountain. Behind them the Oracle continued to rage, creating geysers of flame and streams of molten rock. Soon his anger turned from red hot to ice cold. The Dragon spirit within him was buried deep down beneath the hate. Like any lover scorned, he could think of nothing but the pain he felt and the one who had caused it. He too descended the mountain and headed for Kyuden Shosuro, intent on finding his lost love.

Shosuro Under Siege

Shiriko and her escorts arrived back at Kyuden Shosuro in the early evening. By this time Shiriko had composed herself and was able to present the rest of her family with an accurate account of what had happened and the mistake she had made. The family, although disturbed and shocked at the story, decided that she had made the right decision at the time and forbade her from committing seppuku. They assumed that the Oracle would simply pass on the mantel of the Oracle to the eta girl, if he had not done so already.

Eight hours later they found out how wrong they were when, in the middle of the night, sentries shouted out the warning that the castle was under attack. The Oracle of Fire had come in all his anger but not all of his power. The powerful emotions coursing through him were befuddling his connection to the Dragon. Although capable of manipulating fire magic he did not have access to his full abilities, at least not with any control. Nevertheless he represented a real enough threat as the arrows of the castle guards burned to ashes in mid air and bolts of fire scorched the walls and the men who defended them.

The attack lasted for several hours, with the Shosuro family holed up behind its stone walls. Shugenja skilled in the Ring of Water had a very busy night. When dawn broke the mad Oracle retreated, apparently giving up the attack for now. The Shosuro family sent out samurai to inspect the area around the castle. It was only from this exterior vantage point that the Scorpion Clan could see that the oracle had not left without leaving a message.

Scorched into the stone wall with jets of flame were characters twenty feet high which spelled out the Oracle's demand. GIVE ME WHAT IS MINE OR FEEL MY FIRE. The Oracle had made his demand but there was still some hope in this fact. If he wanted Shiriko that meant he had not yet made the eta girl his successor. The Scorpions still had time to act if they hurried and the seeds of a plan had already begun to form in their minds. What they needed now was a little more time.

Chapter One: The Future Aflame

Overview

Here the player characters enter the story and take their first step towards assuming the central role in this drama. On their way to Kyuden Shosuro they come across a village under attack by what appear to be fire spirits of some sort. They smell the smoke before they see it, which draws them on to the burning village. There they catch a glimpse of the Oracle himself before he disappears and are left to fight off the flame spirits and try to discover just what is going on.

It's days like today that make you wish spring would never leave. The sun is out, the air warm, but not hot, and the scenery green again after so many months of white snow and cold winds. Just a few hours out from Kyuden Shosuro you have begun to see increased signs of habitation: farms, small villages, and more well-traveled roads. You begin to notice a whiff of smoke in the air, the smell of burning wood so common in the winter but rare on a fine spring afternoon. As you round a bend you see a large column of thick, black smoke rising from down the road. This is more than a cooking fire; it looks as if several houses, maybe even an entire village, is on fire.

Indeed, most of the village is on fire. The Oracle, wearied from his night-long assault on Kyuden Shosuro has decided to retire for a while but the rage within him continues to burn. Passing near the small village he noticed a pair of lovers wading in a nearby stream. The weariness dissolved from him and anger and jealousy overwhelmed all thoughts of rest. The two youths turned as they heard the bedraggled Oracle howl in pain, and ran towards their village as the woods around them exploded into flames.

Unable to bear the thought of others experiencing love when he could not he decided to turn the heat of their passion into true fire. He awakened the Fire within them, magnifying its powers a hundred fold. The fearful couple transformed into destructive

creatures of flame ready to do their new master's bidding. The Oracle, still rife with hate and anger, turned the pair of fire spirits loose upon their former homes where they are now destroying everything in sight. The player characters stumble into the area not ten minutes later.

The road the heroes are on takes them right through the burning village. The quicker they arrive, the more of the village they can save. If the party continues down the road towards the smoke cloud at a leisurely pace, the GM can increase the sense of urgency by informing the players that their characters have begun to hear screams of terror and anguish filtering through the woods as well. It is up to the GM to decide how much damage the fire spirits do before the party arrives, but if they take their time they should get the impression that more lives could have been saved had they hurried.

As the road crests a small rise and breaks out of the woods you look down upon a tiny village engulfed in fire. You now hear plainly the screams of the residents as they run from house to house, trying in vain to put out the flames. Also running amongst the villagers are two villagers that appear to be on fire. However rather than panicking or rolling on the ground in fear, these fiery figures seem to be chasing the others through the streets, setting more fires as they go. Strangest of all perhaps is the wild-haired man standing in the middle of the road just twenty or thirty yards from you, just watching the smoke filled scene unfolding below.

The nude man is of course the Oracle of Fire himself. He is watching his creations do his work for him. When the party approaches him or calls out he turns on them, a wild, obviously insane look in his eyes. He thinks they might be Scorpion Clan samurai sent by the Shosuro and right now he is in no mood for a real fight - all of his emotions have so distorted his connection with the Dragon that he has grown quite tired. As the heroes approach he raises his hands towards them, yelling for them to stay back. Then a pillar of flame swirls up around him and then dissipates. The Oracle is gone, transported a li further up the road (as much as he could manage in his weakened state).

SAVING THE VILLAGE

The Oracle seen and gone, the heroes now have the fire spirits to worry about. Of course they have no way of knowing that these are actually innocent villagers transformed into monsters and, odds are, they will try to destroy the pair. The only way to figure out their true nature is to stop one of the villagers and ask them what these spirits are. The frightened peasant replies that he or she does not know but that they look somewhat like Girucho and Kako, two young residents of the community.

Unfortunately, there is little time to talk. Three immediate challenges confront the characters and they have to decide how best to deal with them. If they're smart and fast they can overcome all three and win a heroic reputation for themselves

amongst the locals. If they are slow and indecisive they might fail completely and let innocent lives go to waste.

Challenge 1: The Fire Spirits: The two spirits, while mostly mindless at this point, still recognize that the party of armed samurai represents the greatest threat. As soon as the party involves itself in saving the village they turn their full attention on the player characters. The Fire Spirits look like normal humans sheathed in bright, white hot fire. Looking directly at them is difficult since they are so bright, almost like looking into the sun.

This blinding effect coupled with the intense heat they give off makes them hard to deal with in combat. Since their Fire has been so awakened, they are quite quick, but they retain all the other attributes of their human forms. Their only attack is to strike with their hands, and most of the damage they come from the fire and not the punch. Just a few seconds contact sets dry timbers aflame and scorches flesh from bone.

The fire gives them some protection from attacks, but for the most part they are susceptible to normal damage. The problem is that anyone that gets within five feet of them starts to suffer heat damage: an automatic 2k2 fire damage each round spent in close combat with the spirit. The spirits take double damage from all Water spells and if they are ever doused completely in water, (such as in the town well or the nearby stream) the fire is extinguished and they revert to their normal selves. If a "killing blow" is struck using Water magic, they will similarly revert to their normal selves instead of dying (although injuries from ordinary weapons will remain).

Challenge 2: Mother and Child: Meanwhile, in a nearby burning house, a mother and child scream for help. The doorway is blocked by a fallen timber and the house all around them is on fire. The characters could go through a window and try to help get the pair out or try to clear the entry of the burning timber. The fire has spread too far to be put out in time.

FIRE SPIRITS

Earth: 2

Water: 2

Fire: 2

Agility: 5

Air: 3

Void: 1

Rolls When Attacking: 2k2

Rolls For Damage: 1k1 + 2k2 fire damage
(see above)

TN to hit: 20

Wounds: 7: -1, 15: dead

Making it through the window and to the mother and child without getting burned requires a TN 20 Agility+Athletics action. Getting the baby out the same way requires another TN 20 action. Getting the Mother out requires a TN 25 Agility action. Breaking down the timber requires a TN 30 Strength action and means the character suffers 2k2 fire and smoke inhalation damage in the process but the way is clear for the two trapped villagers to escape.

Emphasize their plight right away by having some of the locals call the party's attention to it. If the party does not save the pair within five minutes of learning about them, both die.

Challenge 3: Elder House Aflame: Another house, near the center of the town is home to the village's most prosperous family. The crippled, elderly parents of both husband and wife live within the large wooden home. While the rest of the family has gone out to help fight the spreading fires, these elders are left in the house. Now the house has caught fire and unless someone puts it out quickly, the four ancients inside will die.

The sooner the characters take care of the fire, the easier it is to put out. Again, they should become aware of the plight of the elderly denizens immediately, this time through the voice of a grandchild whose parents are too busy fighting other fires or have fled for their lives in the face of the fire spirits. There is water in the nearby well and sand and shovels all around. The party has five minutes before the house becomes engulfed in flame.

One person working at transporting water from the well or shoveling sand can keep the fire at bay, not putting it out but keeping it from spreading anymore. Two people reduce buy an extra round of leeway. After five rounds, two people can put the fire out completely. Three can put it out in three rounds, and four or more can put it out in two rounds.

AFTERMATH

Once everyone is safe and what fires that can be quashed are, the heroes have a chance to talk to the villagers and discover just what happened here. Unfortunately they do not know. Only a few of them even saw the wild eyed stranger and none of them recognize him. Even the transformed lovers remember little of him besides the fact that he yelled like a madman and consumed them in fire. A few noticed that there were bright lights coming from the direction of Kyuden Shosuro (about five li away) last night, but assumed they were part of some celebration. Obviously the answers to what happened here lie further down the road.

It is possible that the heroes might decide to pursue the Oracle (not knowing who he is) instead of proceeding on to Kyuden Shosuro. Unfortunately they have no idea where he has gone since he vanished. Still, a thorough search of the surrounding countryside over the next day and into the night leads them to the base of the Oracle's mountain home and straight past Chapter Two and into Chapter Three.



Chapter Two: Madness Revealed

Overview

The party arrives at Kyuden Shosuro and sees the damage the Oracle has caused. After explaining their presence the guards at first refuse them entry. Then they seem to have a sudden change of heart and are allowed into the castle. There they meet with Shosuro Hametsu himself who explains what happened (from a Scorpion point of view) and then asks the heroes to help him and

his family by acting as envoys to the mad Oracle. In reality he is simply using them to buy time for his own schemes.

The road has grown wide and well maintained through the woods and you know Kyuden Shosuro must be close. Surprisingly, there are few fellow travelers on the road, far fewer than you would expect this time of year. The road takes you out of the woods and suddenly you can see your destination. Even from a li away you can tell that all is not right with Kyuden Shosuro. The castle rests atop a gently sloping hill, normally an idyllic scene dotted with pleasant shade trees and covered in lush grasses. Now the smell of smoke permeates the air and the entire hilltop has been scorched to the earth, the grass turned to ashes, the trees blackened stumps. As you approach the castle itself you see that it too has suffered from some sort of fiery assault. The roofs of buildings have burned through in places and the great stone walls have been blackened in great swaths. It takes you only a moment to realize that the scorch marks on the walls are the random patterns of a raging fire but actually form letters. In Kanji twenty feet high someone has burned the words "GIVE ME WHAT IS MINE OR FEEL MY FIRE."



Kyuden Shosuro

The guards along the walls of Kyuden Shosuro are more than a little frazzled after the Oracle's assault. They have orders not to admit any outsiders to the castle without express permission from their lord. If the emperor himself rode up to the gates they would deny him entry until Shosuro Hametsu gave them the word. They no longer trust their eyes, only the word of their daimyo. They challenge the party from about fifty yards out with drawn bows, asking them to state their business.

Whatever errand the PCs are on, it should require them to enter the castle to successfully complete it. The guards question them closely about who they are, where they have come from and who sent them. As the party answers these questions they can see several dozen drawn bows aimed at their hearts. Such treatment is definitely not an appropriate way to treat friendly guests. The GM should emphasize this fact to the players. Obviously something is going on here.

After the rude questioning ends the guards tell the party to wait where they are. It takes about half an hour for the final answer to come. The gates swing open, the bows are lowered, and the heroes are invited inside. There they are met by Shosuro Juberu, one of the daimyo's closest advisers. Juberu is a short, plump man in elegant silks, holding a ivory fan which he uses to emphasize his points when he talks. He greets the party warmly and with all proper respect, apologizing for the delay and rudeness with which they were treated.

Juberu explains that they have had some difficulties recently but refuses to go into any more detail than that. He does not comment upon the words scorched into the wall or even the burned hill surrounding the castle. He deflects these questions as deftly as possible, always apologizing that he cannot answer the party's questions at this time but that if they will just follow him, all will be revealed in time.

THE MEETING

As you walk through the gates and into the interior courtyard of the castle, you notice everywhere the signs of soldiers preparing for siege. Fire has scorched and partially burned many of the buildings and that servants are placing buckets of sand and water in strategic locations all around you. The faces of all are grim with determination and no one seems to even give you a second glance. You follow Juberu up into the third level of the great castle, passing Scorpion guards at every turn. He leads you into a reception hall, a well appointed room that seems to have escaped any damage during whatever happened. A group of four female servants await your arrival in the room. Juberu stands aside to let you enter, saying "They will take care of any immediate needs you might have, my Lord shall see you momentarily."



The party now has a few moments to discuss matters amongst themselves. The four women serve the party well, although they do not answer any questions about what happened to the castle. They simply ask if perhaps they can get the character something to drink or eat or if they would like to hear a song. The food and wine are both of the highest quality, as is everything else about the room, including the hidden bamboo pipes designed for Shosuro listeners to hear everything that is said within the room. Their hosts give the PCs ten or fifteen minutes to talk amongst themselves and give away any secrets they wish to foolishly disclose. The Shosuro wait longer if they overhear the party talking about something interesting, like the attack on the village by the fire spirits.

Finally, the panels slide back and in walk four Shosuro samurai and the daimyo himself, Lord Shosuro Hametsu. At his side are Shosuro Juberu and an as yet unidentified courtier, a man named Shosuro Medo. Naturally, the party is expected to show the proper respect in the presence of such a great man. Hametsu seats himself on a small raised dais at the end of the room. His courtiers sit facing the same direction just in front of the dais. The guards assume their positions at each of the room's four corners (a dozen more wait outside, just a few seconds away).

After the initial pleasantries, Shosuro Hametsu turns the conversation over to his courtier Juberu. Juberu does most of the talking in this conversation, even answering questions that the PCs address directly to Lord Hametsu. Juberu simply sits back

and watches, noticing everything he can about how the party behaves.

Juberu opens the conversation with a brief speech:

"I'm sure you cannot help but have noticed the damage done so recently to our castle. This is embarrassing, and normally I would not burden you with our private problems. However, the root of our distress lies in a situation that has implications for all of Rokugan. I'm sure that once you have heard of what happened here, you will be understanding and forgive us our imposition.

"Recently we learned that the Oracle of Fire had come to the region. Wishing his advice on a family matter, we sent our representative Shosuro Medo to ask the Oracle to share his wisdom. When he arrived, Medo found that the Oracle was with a young eta girl. This was strange enough but the ways of the Oracles are beyond our understanding. Medo politely asked the Oracle our question. The Oracle, horrifyingly, responded angrily. He shouted and cursed Medo, saying that he was tired of answering questions for foolish mortals, that he was tired of this world. He screamed in the face of our frightened envoy, saying that he was going to give us what we deserve. He was going to ascend into the Celestial Heavens and leave this young eta girl as his successor. He said that he would make this half-wit daughter of a grave-digger the next Oracle of Fire!

"As you can imagine, Medo was horrified, and fled the Oracle's presence. The Oracle, obviously insane at this point, began emitting waves of fire and goutts of lightning. Medo barely

escaped with his life. He returned home to report what had happened only to have the Oracle come close upon him. There he stood for all of us to see, stark naked and raving like a lunatic. He actually attacked our castle, with no provocation! We were too frightened to fight back; we simply tried to put out the fires as fast as he could light them.

"Finally, in a booming voice like thunder, he demanded 'What is His,' although we had no idea what this might mean. He then ordered us to send it to him soon or that he would destroy our castle. He ended his demands with a diatribe against both the Shosuro family and the Scorpion clan. I know not what we have done to deserve the wrath of such a being. I feel certain that he has gone mad and a mad oracle presents a danger to all of us."

Shosuro Juberu then introduces Shosuro Medo, the other courtier sitting in the room. The two men gladly answer any questions they might have about what happened. Medo elaborates well upon the basic story Juberu just told, giving plenty of examples of how mad the Oracle must be. He goes on to describe the ugly, half-witted eta girl, an urchin so filthy he could scarcely stomach to be in the same room as her. How could any right-minded being choose such a piece of garbage as its successor? It makes no sense.

They listen with interest if the party chooses to tell them of their encounter in the nearby village. From the description, the man they saw can only be the insane Oracle, and his behavior certainly seems proof of the divine personage's madness. Juberu



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says that they have decided to send an envoy back to the Oracle and try to appease him in some way. However, they are not sure how best to do this, given the Oracle's expressed negative feelings towards the Scorpion Clan.

THE OFFER

Finally, Lord Hametsu himself speaks. "Perhaps you might offer to help us," he says. Juberu acts as if the idea had never crossed his mind but that it's the most brilliant plan ever conceived. He asks the party to act as envoys to the Oracle. Since they are not part of the Shosuro family, the Oracle will not bear them any ill will. They can find out what he wants and perhaps even solve the mystery of his madness.

Hametsu speaks again. "Your aid would be most appreciated," he says. The GM should make sure the players realize how significant Hametsu's offer is. The Daimyo of one of the most powerful families in Rokugan would owe them a debt of gratitude. One never knows when such a valuable ally could come in useful. Juberu will continue to urge the party to help only if he sees that they are reluctant. He may offer other incentives, such as monetary rewards if the PCs are the kind of people swayed by such things.

This is the moment of truth. If the party agrees then it's on with the adventure. If they refuse, they meet the Oracle again on their way out of the Scorpion lands. Assuming the party agrees to help (which the rest of this book

does), Medo gives them directions to the Oracle's current mountaintop residence. Lord Hametsu nods his thanks to them and takes his leave along with the guards. Juberu also thanks them again and asks if there is anything they need.

The heroes are welcome to stay in the castle for the rest of the night. They will need their rest since the journey to the mountain will take the better part of a day. During the night they sleep in comfortable, well guarded rooms on the same floor of the castle as the meeting room. They are afforded every luxury, but may not leave their rooms. Any attempt to "explore" Kyuden Shosuro is met with violent force. The Scorpions do not appreciate others prying too closely into their business.

THE SCORPION PLAN

Of course everything the Scorpions tell the party is a lie. It is important at this stage that it all be very believable. There is no reason for the PCs to suspect the Scorpion of lying (other than the mere fact that they're Scorpions). Juberu's story fits perfectly with all the available evidence. In fact, Lord Hametsu does not believe the party can accomplish anything with the Oracle (besides stalling for time) and, more than likely, they will be killed. Of course when talking to the PCs Juberu insinuates that the danger is very slight.

Having consulted with his own court shugenja and wise mystic masters from both the Soshi and Yogo families, he thinks he has discovered a way to overcome the Oracle and actually transfer the Oracle's power to one of his own family: namely Shiriko. However, he needs more time in order to bring all of the different pieces together to make his plan work. The party will buy him that time, probably with their lives. If they survive their encounter, they might even prove helpful in executing the final plan since the Scorpions need a way to get Shiriko safely back into the presence of the Oracle once all the preparations have been made.

The Scorpion Clan plan revolves around using one of the Clan's most potent nemuranai, the Dagger of Shosuro herself. The clan mystic believe that when Shiriko uses the dagger, she will be able to kill the Oracle and strip his power from him, taking it upon herself. Then, with the newfound power of the Dragon, she can safely remove return the weapon it to the Shosuro family. With Shiriko in place as the new Oracle, she can greatly aid her family in its upcoming struggles. While they have the hand in Kyuden Shosuro, the mystic blade needs to be brought in from Kyuden Soshi and properly prepared, a process that will take at least three, possibly four days. Then the Scorpions shall strike down the divine Oracle, a feat unprecedented in all history.

AFTERMATH

The party now works for the Scorpion Clan, at least for the moment. They have their marching orders and should head out the next morning for the Oracle's mountaintop home. They think the Oracle insane and it is their job to find out what he wants and possibly talk some sense into him.

WHY AN ETA?

In the modern age of democratic ideals, it's difficult to get into the mindset of a caste system like Rokugan's. In order to understand why the Scorpion are so horrified by the Oracle's choice for a successor, the players must understand just how reviled the eta are. As the lowest ebb of human society, eta represent all that is rank and base. They shovel manure, dispose of corpses, and handle the dead flesh of animals. Everything they come into contact with is considered filthy. Nobility, heimin, even geisha and merchants cannot stand to be in their presence. One may as well make a pig the next Oracle of Fire than an eta.

Unless they are truly extraordinary (and suffer Honor penalties accordingly) the player characters will feel the same way about the eta as the Scorpion do. The question is, is their revulsion enough to overcome what appears to be divine will? In the west, the answer would be easy, but here, it's much more muddled. Do you blindly obey the word of Heaven, trusting its wisdom to see what you cannot? Or do you stand up for what you know is right, even if the Oracle of Fire himself opposes you? The adventure hinges on the choice the characters make.

Chapter Three: Trial by Fire

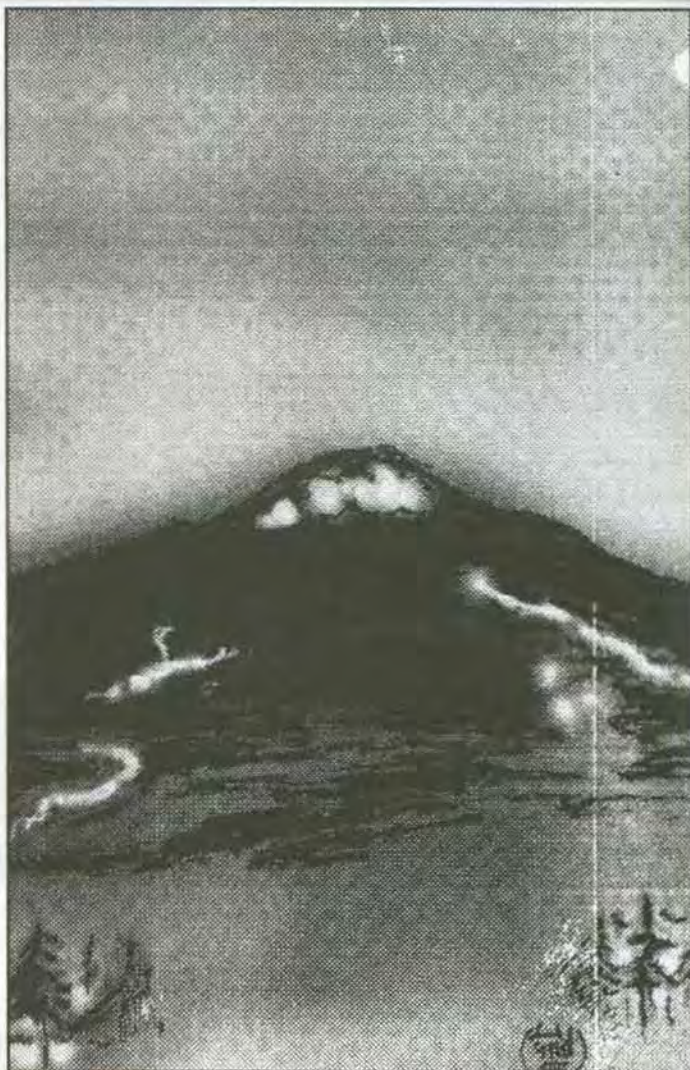
Overview

The party, acting as negotiators for the Scorpion Clan, must ascend a nearby mountain to confront the insane Oracle of Fire. This is not as easy as one might think since the Oracle has transformed the entire face of the mountain into a hellish, fiery landscape. The party picks its way past pools of lava, walls of fire, and jets of steam to finally make it to the top and the madman himself.

The Journey Begins

If the heroes spoke to the Scorpion Clan, they can tell them where the Oracle had set up his temporary home. Since it's a fair ways off (some fifteen li), this is probably where the Oracle retreated to recover. They give the PCs detailed directions but prefer not to send any of their own people along as guides since any association with them might damage the party's credibility with the Oracle (if indeed they have any credibility). Once they come within five li of the mountain they cannot help but notice it. The entire mountain is lit with what appear to be small fires, as if an army was encamped all along the face. Surely this must be the place they seek. As the heroes arrive, night begins to descend.

You stand at the base of the small mountain which you have watched grow larger and brighter for the past few hours. In the twilight you can see that what seemed like camp fires from a distance are actually pools of molten lava and spouts of flame up and down the thousand foot rise. Every tree, bush, and bit of scrub that once clung to the face is now burned away, leaving a bare, rocky mountainside pocked with fiery markers. Even the dirt has been fused into glass, leaving shiny, slick patches here and there. It is like a vision from your darkest nightmares, right up to the top where a tremendous flame seems to burn with no fuel to feed it. To climb such a face seems impossible. Fortunately for you, a set of stairs carved into the living rock wind up into the night towards the peak.



The Oracle created this nightmarish mountain almost entirely subconsciously. In the initial fury at Shiriko's betrayal he let loose the power of the Dragon upon the mountain. This is a great deal of fury indeed and the power of it even scared the Oracle. In fact, fear of losing control of the power in such a way again has caused his link with the Dragon to become tenuous. The Mountain will never be the same. It has become an expression of the Oracle's moods and remains attuned to his emotional state. Right now it is smoldering, just like the Oracle's anger. Although a dangerous place to be, the player characters still have a chance to make it to the top alive. Were the Oracle to become enraged, the whole mountain would flame up, lava would boil forth and the whole stairway would become impassable.

The climb up a thousand stairs takes a while. Exactly how long depends upon how the party deals with the many different obstacles they encounter along the way. Should the players consider giving up in the face of such danger, remind them that they stand to gain a great deal by helping the Scorpion Clan in

this manner and that they have given their words to help. Others might be swayed by promises of the honor and glory that would naturally come to any brave soul who managed to make his or her way to the Oracle under such circumstances.

LAVA STREAMS

You have not climbed more than a hundred winding feet when you come upon a formidable obstacle. The stairs end at a rocky platform roughly twenty feet wide and ten feet across. At the opposite end of the platform ten foot wide chasm splits the side of the mountain. On the other side you can see that the stairs continue on up, but even from where you stand you can hear, smell, and feel the heat of the stream of molten rock that flows through the chasm.

There is indeed lava below and the party has to find a way to get across to the other side. Ten feet is not too far to jump but it is very risky should one miss. A short fall of fifteen feet lands the unlucky soul in a stream of molten lava that causes instant death. Jumping requires a TN 15 Agility+Athletics (or other suitable combination) action. To the left there is nothing but air and a lava fall where the molten rock streams down the side of the mountains and pools below. To the right the side of the mountain

is sheer and smooth as glass. In fact it is glass, sand fused in the heat of the Oracle's fury. It is possible to climb along the wall if the party has spikes or some other way of creating hand holds.

STEAM JETS

As the stairway twists its way around the die of the mountain you hear up ahead a loud hissing sound. The smell of sulfur permeates the air, despite the stiff breeze that blows other scents away. Soon enough you see the source of this sound: jets of steam rising from cracks all along the stairway ahead. It is impossible to see through the scalding mist just how far the steam vents extend.

The steam is very hot, hot enough to cook rice or scald a character's skin badly. Anyone walking directly over one of the half dozen vents receives immediate 2k1 scalding damage. Armor that leaves any portion of the wearer's skin exposed offers no protection from this damage. Wrapping one's exposed flesh in cloth or some other protection reduces the damage by 2 points for each vent. All told the party must pass through five steam vents to get to the other side.

Alternately, clever characters might try to cover the steam vents with something before walking over them. A *jingasa*



helmet or piece of metal armor will work admirably, at least for a short while. Someone or thing must constantly apply pressure to the covering item in order to stop the steam from blowing the cover off. The longer the vent gets covered, the higher the pressure that builds up underneath it. After four rounds of being covered the pressure is so great that it takes the weight of a fully grown man on top of the cover to keep it in place. On the fifth round it will blow the cover and anyone standing on it sky high, possibly even over the side of the mountain.

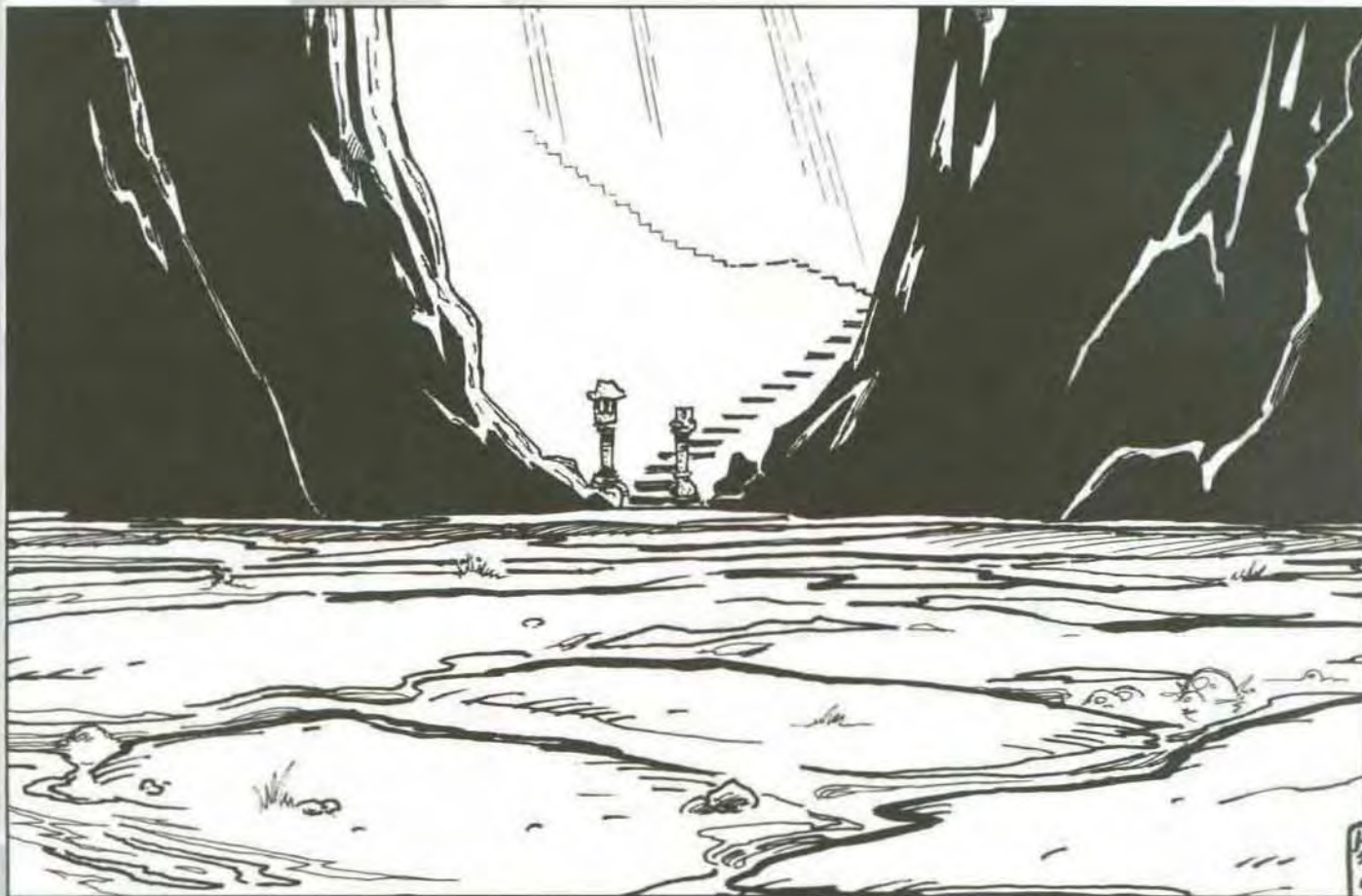
SHIFTING TERRAIN

At first you think it must be the heat, the ground up ahead seems to be shifting. You have come to a shelf about a hundred yards square. On the opposite side the stairway continues upwards. Between here and there you see a field of rock that is behaving more like a pond. Large boulders and mid-sized stones seem to shift and move on their own, flowing in the eddies and currents of the water-like earth that stretches out before you. Although less intense than other places you have been through lately, there is no ignoring the heat that rises from the plateau laid out before you.

The surface the party must cross is of a consistency somewhere between quicksand and freshly laid asphalt. The heroes can walk across it, although their foot sinks into the warm rock about a foot with each step they take. Unless they stay on the move they continue to sink at a rate of one foot every round. For every round the PC stays in place the difficulty of making a Strength action to step out forward again increases by 5. Thus staying put for three rounds requires a Strength TN 15 action to move again.

There are also places where the rock is quite soft and hot, visually indistinguishable but experientially much different. Stepping in one of these areas is like falling into a pit and the character immediately finds him or herself up to the armpits in hot rock. One or more of the fellow PCs must now hurry over and save the poor trapped soul within the next three rounds or they go under. Pulling someone out of a pit requires a TN 20 Strength action. Roll and keep an additional die for every character beyond the first. The Difficulty increases by 5 for each point of Water the trapped person has higher than the one pulling them out. The best way to avoid pits (once you know they're there) is to feel ahead with a spear or even a sword for soft areas.

The small islets of rock offer resting places for a while. The smaller rocks begin to sink under an adult's weight and submerge completely in three rounds. The larger rocks can support one



human indefinitely but begin to sink under the weight of two or more and will disappear in five rounds. The heat from the soft earth causes no significant damage but immersing oneself in it leave clothing covered in dirt and rock.

SLIPPERY SLOPE

The stairs continue on but there is something different about them all of a sudden, they seem to shimmer in the reflected firelight coming from other parts of the mountain. Closer examination reveals the cause: these steps are glass, or at least covered in glass. Smooth to the touch, this volcanic glass seems hard as rock and slick as ice.

The glass stairs continue on up for about one hundred feet. Doing anything besides walking very slowly upon them results in a lot of slipping and sliding, something that could potentially lead to falling off the side of the mountain altogether. Moving quickly requires a TN 15 Agility action to keep one's feet where you want them. If the player makes a raise they can move even faster or perform more intricate acts. Using a spike or blade to anchor oneself is relatively easy since the glass is somewhat brittle, it makes for slow but safe movement.

That's fortunate since there are still the fireflies to deal with. These are not just your average fireflies but rather flies composed of real fire, transformed courtesy of the Oracle's madness. These insects descend upon the party when they are about halfway up the glass stairs. They home in on the cool, exposed flesh of the party. A successful attack by a character swishes the firefly away, killing it. However, if the character wishes to move and swat at the same time (the only way to get up the stairs), then they must also make Agility rolls to avoid slipping and falling.

Each round each hero gets attacked by between one and three fire flies. The flies automatically cause one point of damage unless swatted away. It takes five rounds of normal speed movement to reach the end of the glass stairs (each round requiring successful Agility actions to avoid falling). Characters using a blade to anchor themselves or moving at a safe speed take twice as long to reach the top. Of course the flies don't leave just because the party clears the stairs. They stick around for another few hundred feet of stairs, but at least the party can run once they clear the slippery slope. Running characters encounter only one fly per round and can swat them away (attack) and run at the same time without fear of falling.

Chapter Four: The Oracle's Wrath

Overview

Having reached the mountaintop, the PCs come face to face with the Oracle, who is at first in no mood to talk. However, the player characters have a chance to build a rapport with him and get him to tell the story of what really happened. Thus, they would learn the truth about what caused his anger (or at least the Oracle's version of it).

You stand at the top of the long stairway, trying catch your breath only to have it taken away again by the sight laid out before you. The top of the mountain is perfectly flat and smooth. In the center, polished stone floor is a fifty foot wide pool of molten lava with a small island of rock in the center of it. A single, two foot wide rock bridge crosses the lava to the island where a huge stone throne rests. There on a rock throne sits the Oracle of Fire, clad in a white silk kimono, loosely tied about his waist. To either side of him a fifteen foot pillar of fire burns without any obvious source of fuel.

It is the same man you encountered on the road to Kyuden Shosuro, and although clothed, he looks just as wild eyed as he did then. His long black hair is in disarray, his posture hunched forward in his seat. He drums the fingers of his right hand on the arm rest, producing sparks and small puffs of smoke each time finger touches stone. He looks out across the lava towards you but says nothing.

Speaking with Divine Madness

The Oracle has known of the party's approach since they reached the mountain and began climbing his stairway. What he does not know is what they want from him. He has half a mind to destroy them outright, but their persistence has piqued his

interest. Furthermore, deep down inside, the Oracle actually wants to talk to someone about his problems. The life of a divine seer has not prepared him for these emotions and a sympathetic ear might help him sort out some of the strange urges that periodically overcome him. Urges like the desire to raze Kyuden Shosuro and kill everyone within.

The truth is, the Oracle does not want to kill anyone, at least not when he is in his right mind. He does not even really want to kill Shiriko. In fact, he's not at all sure what he wants from Shiriko except that he needs to see her again. At the same time, whenever he sees or thinks of certain things, like love or betrayal, he completely loses control of himself and gets swept up in the emotional rip tide. Then he starts lashing out with the power of the Dragon, scarcely in control of what he is doing. The lack of control has introduced him to one more emotion: fear, something just as confusing as love and hate.

In the ensuing conversation between the player characters and the Oracle, the GM should play up this bi-polar personality as much as possible. Whenever the topic of conversation is not directly related to Shiriko and her actions the Oracle is calm, collected, and enigmatic, just what you might expect from an Oracle. When Shiriko occupies the forefront of his mind he can become profoundly sad, incredibly angry, or just plain manic. Of course, Shiriko is exactly what the party needs to learn about most so they must choose their words carefully.

Unless the party does something to actually threaten the Oracle (they're not that dumb are they?) he does not hurt them. However, two pillars of fire flank his throne and are fully animate, responding to his mental commands. He might well use these mobile columns of flame to emphasize points or herd the player characters around. Unless the party has access to some particularly powerful fire quenching artifact there is no way to stop these flame pillars. Even water magic has no effect. Should the PCs foolishly engage the column of fire it does 5k5 damage per round.

The Oracle waits for the party to make the first move. He simply watches and sits, refusing to talk to them unless they approach him in the proper, deferential manner one associates with an Oracle. The party must act with respect at all times otherwise the Oracle threatens to end the interview. He only warns them once. A second instance of disrespect and he stops talking while the pillars of fire begin to usher the party back towards the stairs.

Another problem the characters might have is that it is very, very hard to lie to the Oracle. He allows the party to lie to him just once. He then warns them that they had better be forthright with him from now on or the interview is terminated (and they might be as well). Lying to the Oracle requires an Awareness+Sincerity vs TN 35 (the Oracle's Intelligence X 5).

Q & A

Presented here are a number of different subjects the party is likely to bring up while conversing with the Oracle. Since the

characters do not know about Shiriko or the seduction the conversation probably starts out relatively calm and reserved. Each subject heading listed below contains the information the Oracle is willing to divulge on a given topic. Of course, the Oracle tends to answer questions with questions, at least the first time. This is an old habit, designed to get people to think for themselves instead of relying on him for answers. Whenever questioned he first questions the petitioner's motives for asking the question. What does the questioner hope to learn? What do they think the answer is? What would they like the answer to be?

Only after the petitioner has answered these questions to the Oracle's satisfaction does he reply to their questions. This traditional pattern breaks down when the conversation closes in on the topic of Shiriko or even love in general. Then he can become curt and nasty, long winded and rambling, or incomprehensibly manic, depending on what the GM prefers. Remember though that the Oracle wants to get these things off his chest and as long as the heroes guide him along rather than press him for quick answers he eventually tells them all they need to know.

•Why did You Attack the Village?

The Oracle has only vague memories of attacking the village. He skirts around this question because it makes him nervous that he lost control that way. He remembers seeing a pair of lovers by the side of a stream. However, even the waters of the stream could not quench the fire in their hearts. It was the fire of their love that turned them against the village. He had nothing to do with it. That's his story and he's sticking to it.

•Why did you grow angry at Shosuro Medo?

This is an easy one. He has no idea who Shosuro Medo is and he never attacked him. Certainly no one fitting that name or description has ever come to him on this mountain (or any other).

•Why did you attack Kyuden Shosuro?

The Oracle denies attacking Kyuden Shosuro. If he wanted to destroy the castle it would be rubble now; technically he did not really attack the Shosuro, he merely "confronted" them. He has no enmity towards the Scorpion Clan or the Shosuro family. His "attack" was merely a demonstration of his power to show them that he is not one to be trifled with. That they should give him what he wants and they can live in peace.

•What is it you want? What does your message mean?

Something was promised to him, something of great value. Then, through perfidy and deceit that thing was taken away. He deserves to either have that thing returned to him or a good explanation as to why it was taken away. This is a matter of personal honor and respect towards the gods, both of which certain members of the Shosuro family have offended gravely.

•What thing was taken from you?

The Oracle tries to avoid this one since it means talking about Shiriko. He knows that the "stolen thing" is very important and that he needs to discuss it. He tries to be evasive but gives little hints that it is something intangible. "She stole something from within me and left something horrid in its place," is a good



example. Eventually, if carefully pressed, the Oracle reveals that she stole his love, his newest and most treasured possession. Any character who knows a thing about Oracles (Theology Check, TN 10) realizes that they are not supposed to fall in love.

•Who took it?

Here's where things get tricky. The GM should use this question to make it absolutely clear that, no matter how calm and normal he seems at other times, the Oracle is in fact insane. He can go from tears of sorrow to bellows of rage in but a moment. If the party has gotten him this far he gives up the obfuscations and the misdirection and just starts spilling his guts. He tells his own version of the events described in the introduction to this book.

As you relate the tale, you should focus on Shiriko and her beauty. Also, the Oracle believes that Shiriko really did love him

at first (he cannot admit to himself that he was fooled). He does not even mention the eta girl at first. He merely says that he was preparing to step down as oracle when Shiriko arrived and professed her love. Then he goes on a bit about how wonderful it was to feel true love for the first time and how unbelievable it was to lie with her like husband and wife. Through all this he's sad, melancholy, even remorseful.

Then comes the part where she tries to convince him to make her the next oracle. He feels the warmth in his heart grow cold. Then, she mentions the eta girl for the first time. He can hear the disgust in her voice. Now he knows. She loves *him* no longer. She just wants his power. The power has driven her mad, destroyed their love. She fled him then and in his anger he pursued her. All he wants to do is talk with her, work things out, perhaps renew their love.



•What do you mean, Passing On?

The Oracle becomes calm again at this question. He says that he has lived on this world for centuries and that the time has come for him to move on to the Celestial Heavens and pass the soul of the Dragon onto his successor.

•The Eta Girl?

Here again the Oracle grows angry. In his divine wisdom he found the perfect successor, a young grave-digger girl. Shiriko may not like it, but the eta will succeed him, that is all there is to it. Anyone who dares to defy his will in this matter risks his wrath. Even if it means destroying the entire Shosuro family or the entire Scorpion Clan, the eta will become Oracle. Just as soon as he takes care of matters with Shiriko and finds the eta again... she seems to have run off.

In fact this is the first time the Oracle has thought of the girl in the present tense. He has totally lost track of her and assumes she has returned to her family. It matters not, he shall find her when the time comes for him and his love to ascend to the heavens.

•What can we do to help?

If the party has treated the Oracle with respect and showed signs of caring and understanding then the Oracle receives this question well. If they ask it too quickly he immediately distrusts them, assuming that they seek to manipulate him in some way. He says that all he wants to do is see Shiriko and he can take of that himself. He asks them to do him a favor: tell the Scorpion Clan that he does not plan to harm anyone, not even Shiriko. He just wants to speak with her. One way or the other he's coming back to Kyuden Shosuro soon and plans to find her, even if he has to tear down the castle to do it.

If the party has done a really good job of winning him over, of showing that they care and understand, then the Oracle asks them to do him another favor. He would like them to go and find the eta girl and bring her to him. She is the daughter of a family of grave diggers living in the village of Mura Tedoni which is about the same distance from both the Mountain and Kyuden Shosuro (two days travel there, give or take a few hours). He demands that the party swear to protect the eta girl and bring her to him. If they do this, he swears not to harm Kyuden Shosuro or anyone within it, assuming he is allowed to speak with Shiriko.

INTERVIEW'S END

Once the Oracle has unfolded his heart to the party and they have offered to help the conversation pretty much ends. The Oracle is eager for the party to be on its way so that they can deliver his message (and possibly find the eta girl). Suddenly the PCs feel a fierce hot air on their faces. The wind does not even ruffle the folds of the Oracle's kimono but it threatens to sweep the characters off their feet. The wind strengthens to gale force, pushing the characters towards the mountain edge. Curiously, the pillars of flame seem also immune to this preternatural gusting. Eventually, no matter what they do, the wind sweeps the character off the mountain.

Fortunately, it also lowers them gently to the ground, bypassing the hard path they traveled to reach the summit. In a matter of minutes they have returned to the base of the mountain, safe and sound. If on the other hand the character did not end the interview on amicable terms, the Oracle does not offer this easy way down. Instead the pillars of fire force the characters back the way they came, requiring them to retrace their steps and once again face all the obstacles they have so recently overcome.

ATTACKING THE ORACLE

There are no stats for the Oracle; at this point he is unstoppable. He can anticipate any attack the party might make and destroy them in an instant.

AFTERMATH

Back at the base of the mountain, the party has to choose between two paths. The more likely course of action takes them back to Kyuden Shosuro so that they can give their report to the Scorpions. Furthermore, they no doubt have many questions about a certain Shosuro Shiriko, someone the Scorpions completely failed to mention. It is possible that they will instead choose to press on towards Mura Tedoni to find the eta girl first. This means ignoring the wishes of both the Scorpions and the Oracle, but that may not stop them. If they choose the latter path, the journey takes two days. If they have angered the Oracle, then they probably head back to Kyuden Shosuro to report on their failure.



Chapter Five: Choosing a Path

Overview

The party once again meets with the Scorpion Clan, one way or another. In the face of new lies from the Shosuro family the party has to decide down which path their fate lies. Will they become hired killers for the Scorpions and assassinate the eta girl or will they keep their word to the oracle and protect the girl? The choice they make here determines the future course of the adventure and their entire lives.

Debriefing

When the characters make it down to the bottom of the Oracle's mountain they find that they are not alone. Waiting for them is Shosuro Medo. The Scorpion courtier steps out of the shadows and approaches the party. He appears to be alone and unarmed but in fact there are six Scorpion samurai lurking in the surrounding woods, waiting to back him up if need be. Medo greets the party warmly, expressing his profound gratitude that they are alive, and inquires as to how their meeting with the Oracle went.

Medo is here to make sure that the party continues to act in the best interests of the Scorpion clan, now that they have managed to survive their encounter. His chief concern is finding out what if anything the Oracle told them, particularly in regards to the eta girl and Shiriko. He has his lies well prepared for dealing with any questions the party might ask him about either of these subjects, but as he answers the PCs' inquiries he also tries to find out everything that the Oracle told them.

Asked about Shiriko, Medo expresses shock. Why yes, there was a young courtier woman named Shiriko who went to the Oracle with him. She was there simply to observe and record whatever words of wisdom the Oracle had to offer. Shiriko never spoke to the Oracle at all except to offer her greetings and respects. You say the Oracle is in love with her? How can this be? He saw her for but a few minutes. Surely this is further proof that



the divine being has indeed lost his mind. Medo then tries to change the subject away from Shiriko (although not too obviously, he never seems discomfited or anxious when speaking of Shiriko; he just obviously finds it irrelevant).

What Medo really wants to talk about is the eta girl. The Scorpions know very little about the eta at this point. Most importantly, they do not know her name or what village she is from. While the Oracle did not mention the girl's name to the party (if he even knows it), he may have said that she was from Mura Tedoni, a fact that the Scorpions desperately need to know in order to carry out their plans.

Once Medo answers all of their questions, he strongly urges the party to return with him to Kyuden Shosuro. He says that Lord Hametsu wishes to speak with them and hear their report personally. If the party agrees, then all is well and the journey proceeds uneventfully. If, however, the party decides to head directly for Mura Tedoni to find the eta girl, Medo tries to convince them to return with him instead. If he cannot convince



them, or if they decide to split up, Medo warns them that there is a group of Phoenix warriors on the prowl in the region. They are worried about the Oracle's insanity and are looking for someone to blame. The party should exercise caution when traveling.

This warning is in fact true, there are Phoenix samurai in the region, but they are not looking for a fight (not yet anyway). However, the hidden Scorpion Samurai backing Medo up just happen to be wearing Phoenix armor and costumes. Should the party choose not to return to Kyuden Shosuro (either in whole or in part), these six false Phoenix attack them sometime within the first hour of their journey. The Scorpions do not want matters to get out of their control, especially when it comes to information about what really happened with the Oracle of Fire.

It may seem odd that Medo chooses the peaceful Phoenix as his scapegoat. In fact, there is a group of Phoenix samurai in the area - six yojimbo escorting a shugenja on her way to meet with the Oracle. Medo hopes to intercept them before they reach the

Oracle and has already dispatched other Scorpion assassins to take care of the would-be oracular supplicants. If he can blame their deaths on the party at some later date, so much the better.

AN OFFER THEY CAN'T REFUSE

Assuming the party agrees to return to Kyuden Shosuro, the journey goes well and they never see the Scorpion samurai. They continue to lurk in the area, watching to see if anyone else ascends the mountain to speak with the Oracle. The Scorpions have orders to kill anyone who ventures up the mountain and makes it back alive, as well as to report immediately when the Oracle himself comes down. Medo is a pleasant traveling companion and entertains the party with a number of amusing and poignant anecdotes from his own experiences at court and as a diplomat. He avoids discussing "business" until they are all in the presence of Lord Hametsu.

Keeping in mind that it takes about ten hours to return to Kyuden Shosuro (seven if they push their mounts), the party probably arrive at the palace sometime in the middle of the morning, unless they stopped to rest for the night. If they did not sleep they are all dead tired from their various physical and mental exertions, but Lord Hametsu wants to see them immediately. While servants tend to their horses, Medo ushers the party back into the audience hall they previously met in. The same servants offer the PCs refreshments while they wait for Lord Hametsu to come up from his garden.

This time, Lord Hametsu comes into the room by himself (although a dozen armed guards stand just outside). He is dressed in a simple but elegant red kimono and a red mask that covers his entire face. He receives the bows of the party with a cursory acknowledgment and then gets down to business. Medo has already informed him of everything the party told him plus anything else he might have been able to surmise from their behavior. He knows what stance the party has taken and what they seem to think about Shiriko.

"Tell me of your meeting, briefly," Lord Hametsu does not want them to go into too much detail, just enough to cover the basics. Then he asks a rather startling question: "What should be done to resolve this matter?" The party is probably not accustomed to having a daimyo ask of them what should be done, especially in such a serious matter. However, they need to come up with a good answer, very quickly. Hametsu has already decided on a course of action, but he asks the party what they would do in order to gauge just where they stand. Do they favor the Oracle or the Scorpion Clan?

The party, having talked with the Oracle, knows what he wants: he wants to see Shiriko and to find the eta girl once again. They might well suggest that the Scorpions can cure all of these problems simply by acceding to these two demands with very little cost to themselves. Hametsu, naturally enough, has answers to both of these options. As he explains them, he tries his best to work the party into concluding for themselves that the only way to deal with a mad Oracle is to somehow put him down.

Although they probably have no idea how such a thing might be accomplished, by the end of the conversation Hametsu hopes that they shall see it is the only viable option.

HANDING OVER SHIRIKO

Lord Hametsu says that he would gladly hand Shiriko over if he could. She is young, inexperienced and not particularly vital to Shosuro family interests. Her noble sacrifice would be well worth the price if it meant saving all of Kyuden Shosuro. However, there are complications that make this both impractical and impossible. First of all, we have no reason to believe that a madman, even if is an Oracle, will hold true to his word. He might or might not kill Shiriko. Having chosen her fate, he might decide to attack the Shosuro again anyway. The mere fact that he has become obsessed with mortal woman he met for just a few minutes shows that he cannot be trusted to think rationally.

All of this discussion is irrelevant however; the Scorpion claim that Shiriko has committed the ultimate act of cowardice and secretly fled the castle. The Scorpions do not know where she went, but suspect that she has run towards the sea. She was adopted recently into the Shosuro family, and was being trained by their actors' guild. Who knows where she has gone? Fear not, the Scorpions will find her and bring her to task for her misbehavior, but for now she is out of reach. Therefore, it is impossible to accede to this demand of the Oracle's.

THE ETA GIRL

Lord Hametsu goes on to explain that the Shiriko problem pales in comparison to the question of the eta girl. All agree that the Oracle has without a doubt gone mad, but that may not have anything to do with Shiriko. In all likelihood, he lost his mind sometime before Medo and his entourage arrived at the mountain. The evidence for this conclusion lies in the fact that he chose a lowly eta as his successor. How could someone in their right mind choose the lowest, most base of human creatures to assume the mighty gifts and wisdom of a Dragon? How could such a thing, scarcely a person and not even fully grown, wield that power with wisdom? Obviously, it is impossible.

So, it is imperative that the eta girl be found, and brought back to Kyuden Shosuro. With her in hand perhaps the Scorpions can talk some sense into the Oracle. They need something to hold against the Oracle if they are to bring him to terms. Lord Hametsu has consulted his Soshi shugenja cousins and they assure him that with the eta girl there is a good chance that they will be able to cure the Oracle of this madness. If however they were to simply hand the girl over to the Oracle then there would be no way of stopping him from doing anything. Who knows what might happen? He could attack Kyuden Shosuro anyway. Even worse, the madman could make the girl his successor, an act which would damage all of Rokugan!

THE OFFER

Having laid out these arguments, Lord Hametsu gives the party a chance to debate them with him. Of course, most of what he says is lies, but they have no way of knowing that. Should they foolishly accuse him of lying, Lord Hametsu asks in menacing tones why they doubt his word. If they do not retract their accusations, he may well have them killed where they sit. He does not need them for his plans, but would prefer to use them if possible.

As long as the conversation remains civil and polite, Hametsu debates with the party for quite a while. He is very persuasive and should have a ready answer for any objections the party brings up: Who are we to defy the will of an Oracle? Well, says Hametsu, perhaps you are right, but this is an insane Oracle. We should at least delay him until we have had time to consult the Emperor. Perhaps they can help. The GM should emphasize to the players that their characters feel natural repulsion at the idea of a lowly eta becoming one of the most powerful beings in Rokugan.

Finally, once he has convinced the party of his position (or sees that they cannot be swayed from theirs) he makes them an offer. He wants them to journey to Mura Tedoni and find the eta girl. What he wants done next depends entirely upon how the characters have reacted to his overtures over the last half our or so. What he wants more than anything if for the party to simply go and kill the eta girl. Thus her blood will be on their hands and the Oracle shall be deprived of his chosen successor. If the heroes seem amenable to such a mission, he offers it to them. However, he only asks them to kill the girl if they have shown that they firmly believe that the Oracle is insane and must be stopped.

More likely, the heroes have shown some concern for the Oracle's wishes, especially if they managed to create any kind of rapport with him during their conversation. Hametsu, a shrewd judge of character, senses that the party has no interest in killing the girl so he simply asks them to find her and bring her back to Kyuden Shosuro, alive. If the players express an interest in finding Shiriko instead he insists that he has that matter well in hand.

Either way, Hametsu emphasizes how thankful he and the entire Scorpion Clan are for all the party has done on their behalf already. His gratitude would "know no bounds" should the party undertake this additional task for him. He fears that the Oracle himself might either be watching the palace or the eta girl's village. Were he to see a group of Scorpion samurai make the journey he might kill them and certainly he could prevent them from reaching the girl. The party however already has a rapport with the Oracle and he no doubt trusts them more than he would any Scorpion. Thus the party has a much better chance of recovering the girl safely and surreptitiously.

DECISIONS

If the party has agreed to kill the girl, they have entered in a pact with the Scorpion Clan itself. Hametsu welcomes them into the fold and promises them great things for their future. With the

whole Scorpion spy network at their disposal, who knows how far they can pursue their own ambitions? If the party consists of characters likely to be swayed by such things Lord Hametsu is not above offering monetary bribes as well, up to a small fortune and even an estate within Shosuro lands.

If the party has agreed merely to escort the girl, Lord Hametsu is less giving. He thanks them for their help and promises that their friendship shall be repaid in kind some whenever they ask for it.

Should the party refuse to have anything to do with finding the eta girl or stopping the Oracle, Hametsu shakes his head sadly and wishes them a safe voyage. He thanks them kindly all they have done already and offers them accommodations for the night. Of course with all they know, the Shosuro Daimyo cannot allow them to leave the palace alive.

If they partake of his hospitality for the night they better avoid both food and drink since Hametsu himself poisons both with some of his rarest and deadliest herbs. Should they attempt to leave straight away the guards outside have orders to stop them at all costs. If they hope to escape they're going to have to fight their way out. Even then the Scorpion Assassins continue to hound them for the next week or so, at least until the matter with the Oracle is resolved.

THE SCORPION PLAN

CONTINUED

The Scorpions want to have the party serve as patsies for their greater plan. If the PCs kill the girl then the Scorpion cannot be blamed for the murder. If the PCs refuse to kill the girl, the Scorpions eliminate her anyway and frame the party. Either way, the PCs stand to lose a great deal at the hands of the Scorpions. Lord Hametsu hopes that the PCs actions will serve to distract the Oracle from focusing all of his hate and anger on the Scorpions. Perhaps he will even give up and search out another, more respectable successor. At the very least they will have eliminated this most abominable of choices and bought themselves a little more time to make their final preparations for stealing the Oracle's power.

As for Shiriko, she has not gone anywhere. She is busy preparing herself deep within Kyuden Shosuro for her role in the upcoming Scorpion gambit. Shiriko spends most of her time studying the history and use of the dreaded Dagger of Shosuro which she

intends to wear when she goes out to meet the Oracle once again. Meanwhile the Soshi shugenja are busy bringing the other artifacts and ingredients together that are necessary to complete the plan. In the four days it takes the party to journey to from the eta's village those preparations will be complete.

AFTERMATH

The heroes are probably on their way to Mura Tedoni, a trip of two days. Unbeknownst to them, a team of Scorpion assassins trails along behind them, intent on making sure they do the job right or die trying. If the party have already taken on the task of killing the girl then some of the assassins might well be riding at their side. Even then others lurk in the background. Alternately the heroes are on the run, having managed to both anger and escape the Scorpion Clan. Nowhere is safe to run to, with the possible exception of the Oracle's mountain.



Chapter Six: The Grave Diggers

Overview:

The party journeys to Mura Tedoni to find the eta girl. Once there they discover that the task is not as easy as they thought it might be. Even after they find the correct family, the girl remains hidden from them. Once they convince or force the family to give her up the party then must either kill her or take her into custody. Unless they do the former quickly they find themselves beset by Scorpion assassins sent to do the job for them.

Mura Tedoni

For the past half hour you have traveled through the rice paddies surrounding the low lying village of Mura Tedoni, close by a tributary of the Sleeping River. The town itself sits on a small rise located alongside more rice paddies and appears picturesque and pleasant in warm Spring air. Peasants labor tirelessly in the field, planting and tending this season's crop. It is hard to believe that a place so idyllic and peaceful can exist in the tempestuous lands of the Scorpion.

While the village itself is indeed quite lovely, it is not the ultimate objective. A few quick questions about eta get them pointed in the right direction. The eta village is separate from the main community, located behind the proper town, bordering the swamp. Any villager gladly cooperates with the samurai in the party and shows them where the eta dwell. Unfortunately, none of them pay much attention to who's who among the untouchable caste. They know that there are grave diggers but not which eta are which or where they live. The peasants despise the filthy place and usually just call out from a distance until the desired worker comes out to do his or her task.

From the edge of Mura Tedoni you look down into a swamp that sits behind the village. Between the hill and the swamp is wet lowlands and a squalid little village about one fifth the size of the pleasant community behind you. Ramshackle houses lean against one another for support and figures move back and forth between them and the piles of sludge and garbage that make up the rest of the town. The only exception is the large stone building, a structure you surmise must be the village crematorium.

As you approach the eta village, something you may never have done in your lives, the smell becomes more and more noticeable. By the time you reach the edge of the settlement the stench of rotting food, human and animal waste, and burning flesh has become almost unbearable. The eta have noticed your approach and all stare at you dumbly, obviously startled beyond words to have such lofty personages approaching them.

The eta village has a population of about fifty untouchables. They perform the worst tasks in society: disposing of garbage and human and animal waste, disposing of dead bodies, and sometimes even butchering meat. All of them descend from eta and have children whose children's children will be eta. They have accepted their fate as the lowest rung in Rokugan society. They show great fear and respect towards the party. As soon as the PCs begin to address them they fall to their knees and grovel, averting their eyes from the greatness that stands before them in human form.

They eagerly point the way to the homes that have grave diggers. Unfortunately there are two large families that engage in this practice, both of whom live in long, worn down homes adjacent to the crematorium. Eta families do not have family names like samurai and the party has little to go on at first. The only way to find the girl is to closely question each of the families. No one else in the village is aware that little Tomuko (the girl they seek) was gone for several days, and her family has mentioned the fact to no one. Children come and go often and most eta are too busy to keep track of daily disappearance. Since Tomuko has been in the village the last two days, no one imagines that she ever went anywhere.

THE WRONG FAMILY

The wrong family consists of a pair of grandparents, five adult sons and their wives along with two unmarried adult daughters, and some fifteen children ranging from ages seven to twenty-one. Unless the party arrive in the middle of the night, the entire family is busy at work throughout the area. Some are collecting waste and garbage from the village, others are piling that garbage into the compost heap behind their large, one room home. Even the youngest children work at the family business, although they do so with a little more cheer.

Two of the elder sons and one of the unmarried daughters (aged 16 and possibly young enough to be considered a "girl") work at preparing graves. This means both gathering the bodies

of the dead and disposing of them. Cremation and burial are both options, although cremation tends to be more common. The family dutifully answers any questions the party asks them and firmly denies having anything to do with the Oracle of Fire or the Scorpion samurai.

The daughter, Goriko, does know who Tomuko is, or that she has not been seen in a while. However, she does not willingly reveal this information, at least not at first. She and the girls are friends and Tomuko told her about everything that transpired. Like Tomuko's family, Goriko hopes to benefit when and if Tomuko really does become Oracle of Fire. Furthermore, she cares deeply for her friend and does not trust these highborn strangers. If the party begins to physically harm Goriko's family or somehow convince her that are here on a mission from the Oracle then she reveals that Tomuko is the girl they are looking for.

THE RIGHT FAMILY

The Oracle of Fire first came for Tomuko late in the night. He appeared in the middle of the family home with a bright flash and clap of thunder, awakening everyone in the one-room building (strangely though, no one outside could see or hear these signs of arrival). The Oracle of Fire announced himself and said that he had come to take away their daughter Tomuko and transform her into something more than human. Awed in the presence of such divinity, the eta could not even speak. Tomuko herself felt strangely unafraid and rose to her feet and took the Oracle's hand. Without another word the two disappeared in a flash of fire.

On the floor where they had stood were two exquisitely carved jade figurines, one of Tomuko and one of the Oracle himself, perfect in every minute detail. The family wept with joy and sadness at this strange turn of events. They did not know what it meant, but they did know that whenever they held the figurine of their lost daughter they could feel her presence. The same was true of the Oracle of Fire's figurine, although few in the family dared to hold it for long. Several days later, it became too hot to touch and scorched the oily rag they kept it wrapped in.

When Tomuko returned, covered in soot and full of tears they did not know what to think. She told her strange tale of the beautiful woman who had come to seduce the Oracle of Fire. She felt rejected and useless. How could she have been so foolish as to think a god would choose her over someone as beautiful as the Lady Shiriko? The family showed her the figurines, hoping to calm her. When she saw the figurine of the Oracle, she burst into tears and picked it up. Despite its great heat it did not burn her.

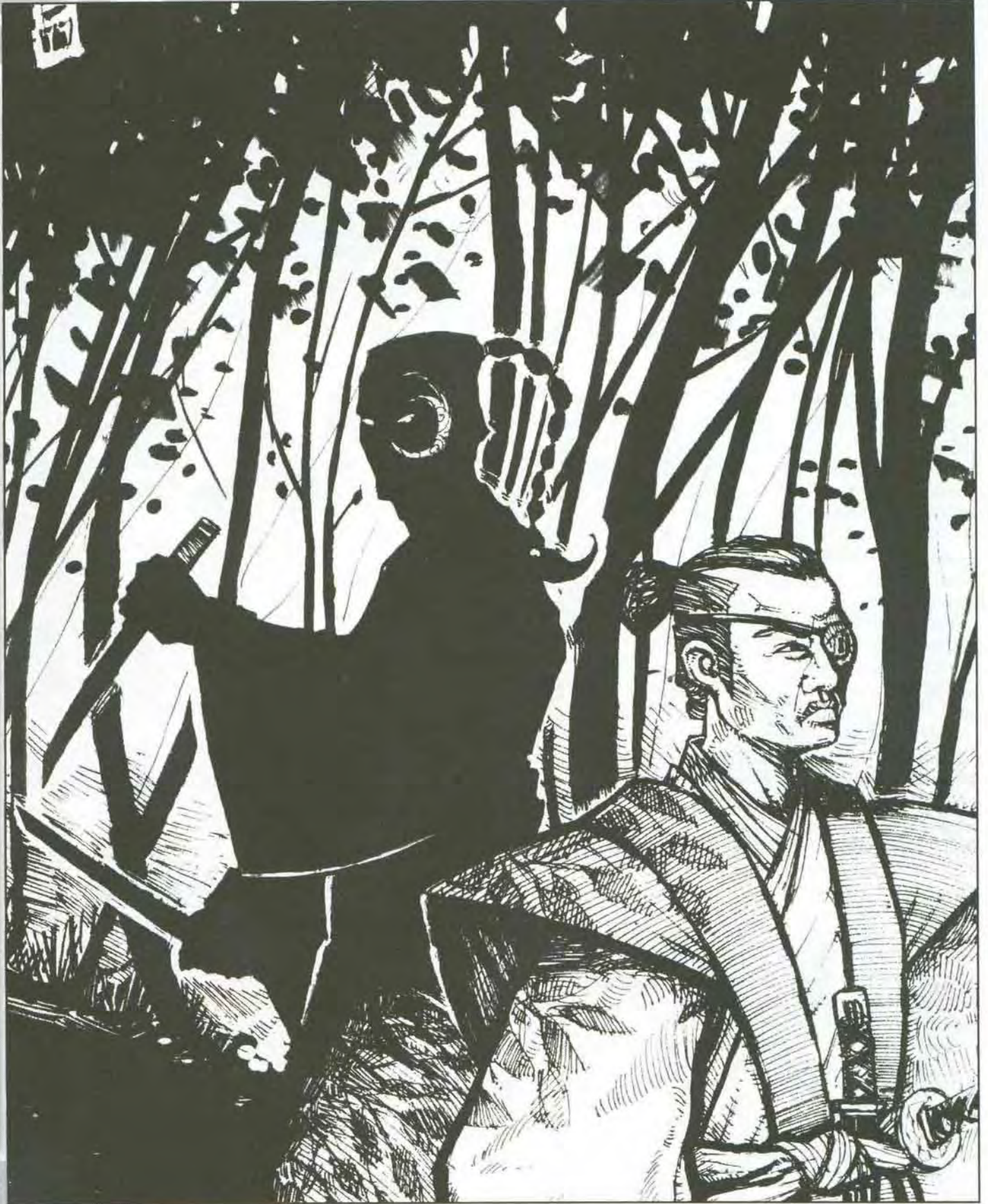
The family believes that the Oracle will come again and that their fortunes shall indeed take a profound turn for the better. Therefore, they are willing to do quite a lot to protect Tomuko from outsiders. While under normal circumstances no eta would dare to oppose a samurai, these are not normal circumstances. They intend to fight, lie, and cover up as much as need be to protect Tomuko and her future.



FINDING TOMUKO

Just asking the family about a girl who met with an Oracle results in firm denials and wonder that such a thing could ever happen at all, certainly not to them. How could they be so fortunate? However, Tomuko herself is not among the family members when the party begins to question them. She is hiding in a secret bolt hole that the family uses to store its few valuable possessions (which now include the two figurines and their daughter). The family says that they are all present, and indeed there are a lot of them: One grandfather, three elder sons, their wives, and eight children ranging from ages two to nineteen. There are four young girls (plus Tomuko who is not present) but only two who are of the right age to match Shosuro Medo's description: one is thirteen the other fifteen. All stink of garbage and death.

The family itself will not reveal that Tomuko is missing, but anyone else in the village can point out that she is not present.



However, they only volunteer this information if the party specifically asks them for it. As much as they fear the party, their true loyalties lie with their fellow eta and they do not want to help any more than they have to. Threat of violence to Tomuko's family do little good since they are all convinced that greater things await them when Tomuko becomes a goddess.

Once the party knows that Tomuko is in fact missing they can then start to put real pressure on the family. They admit she is gone but claim that she has run away from home. They have no idea where she is. Unless they start killing or torturing the family that is all the information they are going to get. However, PCs with crueller streaks can eventually get what they need through violence. Young children forced to watch their parents suffer or subjected to torture themselves will readily reveal Tomuko's hidden location. Certainly not an honorable path but perhaps the most efficient, especially if they plan to kill her anyway.

One tactic is to convince the family that they in fact serve the Oracle of Fire and are here on his behalf (which may be the truth). The family is very suspicious and it takes some convincing. Although they live in Scorpion lands, they have now come to hate their masters (Tomuko recognized Shiriko as a Shosuro Lady, partly because the Oracle identified her as such). If the PCs show any sign that they are in league with the Scorpions or wish to take Tomuko to Kyuden Shosuro, then the family rebuffs them at every turn. If they do not mention working for the Scorpions and from the start claim to be representatives of the Oracle they have a much better chance of succeeding.

Alternately, they can simply tear the place apart until they find her. There is one more sleeping mat than there are people in the building, which might clue the party into Tomuko's existence if they haven't figured it out any other way. Behind the house is the garbage dump and compost heap. A Perception + Investigation roll TN 15 reveals that the garbage has been recently moved and then put back in place. Rotting matter that has obviously been there for weeks now rests on top of relatively new garbage. Someone recently shifted this pile of filth.

Underneath the garbage there is a thick wooden board measuring four feet square. This in turn covers a three foot wide, four foot deep hole which currently contains Tomuko and the two figurines along with a clay jar holding 56 zeni. Tomuko is mud stained, and barely conscious after having lain under the heap of filth, clutching desperately the hot statue of the Oracle of Fire. If the heroes have the family's help in uncovering her then there are no problems. If they have found the location on their own or forced one of the family members to reveal it then there might be trouble.

FAMILY AFLAME

What happens next is up to the GM, who should know what the party actually plans to do with the girl. If they intend to take the girl to the Oracle of Fire or back to Kyuden Shosuro then nothing happens while they are still in the villagers. The family is too scared to put up any resistance to the heavily armed

samurai. The party's next challenge awaits them once they get out on the open road again, away from the prying eyes of villagers.

However, if the party plans to simply kill the girl, or is even seriously considering it, then they will have to have the blood of her family on their hands as well. Tomuko's figurine of the Oracle maintains a kind of subconscious magical link with the mad demi-god. Through it he senses the danger Tomuko faces from the party and he acts as best he can. Arcs of flame spring forth from the figurine like serpents, unerringly seeking out not the PCs but any living members of Tomuko's family (or if they're dead, some other nearby eta or villagers).

In a manner similar to the way in which the Oracle infused the two lovers with fire at the beginning of the adventure, so too are Tomuko's family members transformed into ravaging defenders of the Oracle's chosen successor. Flame sheaths their bodies and they become totally fearless. They attack the offending PCs and them alone, fighting until killed. All told there should be at least one attacker per party member, although the GM may adjust this number in order to provide the group with a tough but beatable challenge.

FLAMING RELATIVES

Earth 1
Water 1
Fire 3
Agility 5
Air 1
Void 2

Rolls When Attacking: 2k2
Rolls For Damage: 3k3 (fire damage)
TN to Hit: 20
Wounds: 8: -1; 12: - Dead

ON THE ROAD

If the party has more kind hearted intentions towards the eta, then the statue does not react and they can safely bring the girl out of the village and back towards their chosen destination (either Kyuden Shosuro or the Oracle's mountain). However, they still have dangers ahead of them. Once they get a few li down the road towards their destination (whatever it may be) the Scorpions intercept them. As when they came down from the Oracle's mountain, Shosuro Medo steps out from the shadows and asks them to halt.

He thanks for finding the girl and commends them on a job well done. He then asks them to hand her over to him. Now if the heroes are planning on bringing her to Kyuden Shosuro anyway

then they probably do not have a problem with this. If however they were bringing her back to the Oracle then it is unlikely that they will hand her over to this sneaky and dangerous Scorpion.

SHOSURO MEDO

Earth: 3
Water: 2
Strength: 3
Fire: 2
Air: 2
Reflexes: 3
Void: 2

Skills: Acting 2, Sincerity 2, Etiquette 2, Investigation 1, Athletics 1, Defense 2, Iaijutsu 1, Kenjutsu 2, Poison 1, Stealth 1, Torture 2

Honor: 2
Glory: 3
School: Shosuro Butei (rank 4)
Weapons: Daisho
Advantages: Voice

BAYUSHI SAMURAI

Earth 2
Fire 2
Agility 3
Water 2
Air 3
Void 2

Kenjutsu 2, Archery 2, Stealth 2, Defense 2, Iaijutsu 2
Honor 1
Glory 2
School: Bayushi Bushi (rank 2)
Weapons: Han Kyu with 20 arrows, Daisho

Shosuro Medo does not debate the matter with the party. He insists that they hand over the girl at once, no questions asked.

Of course Medo is not alone. Hidden in the trees and brush that line the road wait half a dozen Bayushi Bushi, ready to pounce as soon as they receive the signal. Medo orders them to attack as soon as it becomes clear that there is no way that the party will give the girl up. His orders are to kill her today, not wait until she gets back to the castle. The Scorpions fear that he might intercept the girl if she is not killed immediately. They concentrate on attacking the party first and the girl second. They do not consider her a danger, at least not nearly in the same way the party obviously is. The samurai taunt the PCs for defending the girl: "You would give your lives for this, this creature? Do you

serve this eta? Is she your lady? Perhaps you fight for her out of love for such a thing?" and so on. Such jibes should be particularly galling to highborn PCs.

If the party does hand the girl over, Medo draws his blade and immediately prepares to kill the girl. As he forces the sobbing girl to her knees, the PCs have a moment to act before he strikes. They can engage him in brief conversation, during which he simply states that his lord commands it: the girl must die immediately. If the party moves to stop him, the hidden samurai burst onto the scene to stop them. Medo joins in the fight against the party before he finishes off the girl.

If the heroes do nothing, Medo quickly cuts the girl's head from her body, ending any chance that the Oracle might make her his successor. He once again thanks them for their brave and noble service and asks them to accompany him back to Kyuden Shosuro to receive their reward. He makes it pretty clear that they do not have any option in this matter, as in fact they do not. If the party refuses to come back to the palace, Medo orders the bushi to attack at once. The Scorpions do not want any witnesses to what has happened outside of their control. Besides, they want everyone in the village and the Oracle to believe that the party killed the girl, not the Scorpions.

AFTERMATH

Now the heroes have chosen a definite course, one way or the other. On the one hand they might be headed towards Kyuden Shosuro, guilty of or complicit in the death of the young eta. On the other hand they are on their way to the Oracle's mountain, having fought off and made enemies of the Shosuro family. Perhaps they might choose to wash their hands of the matter entirely at this point, but as we shall see, neither the Oracle nor the Scorpions allow that to happen.



Chapter Seven: The Path Chosen

Overview

There are two ways this chapter can proceed, depending on which side the players have chosen to support. They either make their way to the relative safety of Kyuden Shosuro while the Oracle tries to burn them alive from afar, or seek refuge with the Oracle himself while Scorpion shugenja try their own magic against the party. Either way they should end the scene in the bosom of their chosen ally, ready to proceed against their new enemy.

Meanwhile, Back at the Palace...

The journey passes peacefully no matter where the party is headed. It's peaceful for them because it has turned into a fiery inferno for the residents of Kyuden Shosuro. The Oracle has grown tired of waiting. Through the figurine he knows the fate of the eta girl. If the party killed her (or allowed Medo to do it) then he immediately flies into a rage and moves down from his mountain to attack the Scorpion palace. If the party has the girl, however, then he feels that the Scorpions have waited long enough and decides to come forth and reiterate his demands for Shiriko to come to him. That way he can deal with her and then leave this world behind in the care of the eta Oracle.

Either way, the Oracle has moved down from his mountain and begun to threaten Kyuden Shosuro. If he is in a rage because of the dead eta then he holds nothing back in his attack. The angrier he gets the less control he has over the Dragon's power. By all rights he should be able to level the palace with a thought, but he cannot seem to bring that thought together. Instead he hurls bolts of fire and rains down lightning on the castle walls, devastating in their own right, but in truth mere trifles compared to his full power. Even so, the Scorpions cannot hold out against such an assault forever.

Conversely, if he is in a somewhat milder state of mind because the girl is safe (keeping in mind the love-sick madness that still inflicts his mind) then he is more methodical in his approach. Every Rokugani hour he destroys another section of wall or another part of the castle. He has already set fire to Lord Hametsu's precious garden of rare and deadly plants. Each time he demands that they produce Shiriko at once or the destruction will continue. Meanwhile, inside the Scorpions try as best they can to put the final touches on their own preparations.

At the end of the day, unusually tired from all his exertions, the Oracle withdraws and takes refuge in a cave. The next day he plans to venture forth again and finish the job he started. That night however is when the party arrives on the scene, one way or another, and new plans will be laid.

FLIGHT FROM FIRE

This section of the chapter applies only to those parties that have chosen to side with the Scorpions and have thus killed the eta girl. As they draw towards the end of their second day of travel, no doubt with Shosuro Medo and his samurai escort at their side, the party comes within range of the Oracle's immediate fury. Assuming they have one or both of the jade figurines (Shosuro Medo will have taken them if the party does not) with them then the Oracle knows exactly where they are. Even if they do not have these for some reason, the Oracle can sense their general location. Either way he takes some time to turn away from attacking the palace, at least for a moment.

You catch the scent of burning wood in the air. As dusk begins to gather and you approach within a few li of Kyuden Shosuro you realize that this is not some cooking fire but a great conflagration somewhere in the distance. Towards the palace you see that the sky glows orange, and not from the setting of the sun. Even as you realize that this must mean the Oracle has attacked the castle you see an arc of fire cutting across the sky like a great red kite with a thousand foot tail. The beauty of it fades from your mind as you realize it is headed directly for you.

These fiery projections are the Oracle's way of saying "welcome back". At first they are easily avoided as the party sees them coming from li away. Even so they have alarming accuracy and if the PCs do nothing to get out of the way they do get caught in the blast. Whenever a ribbon of fire impacts the earth it spreads out in all directions, engulfing everything in a twenty foot diameter and causing 6k3 damage to anyone caught in the blast. At first this means a lot of burned trees, bushes and grass but as the party gets close to Kyuden Shosuro they become more difficult to avoid.

Of course getting closer to Kyuden Shosuro is exactly what they need to do, which Medo gladly informs them. They need to find safety behind its walls and help the Scorpions prepare to strike back against the Oracle. It's obvious that retreating will do no good since the Oracle seems able to find them and willing to



kill them from a distance. No doubt he plans to destroy them all eventually; better they stand with the Scorpions and their plan which at least has a chance of succeeding.

Dodging additional fire attacks is not much of a problem until they get within a li or so of the palace. Then the line of fire becomes almost direct and the party must move quickly to avoid destruction. As they come out from the trees and over a rise they see the battle laid out before them.

Before you sits Kyuden Shosuro, or what's left of it anyway. The ground all around has been scorched black, and in some places the dirt has been melted by the extreme heat. Pillars of black smoke rise from six or seven different places in the palace. Men scramble about with buckets of water and you see the occasional flash of brilliance as a shugenja uses his or her magic to quench the flames as best they can. The walls have crumbled and fallen in some places and dozens of burned bodies lay strewn about outside the palace walls.

Off in the distance you see the obvious cause of the chaos: a bright sphere of flame which must contain the Oracle of Fire himself. Every minute or so another ribbon of fire separates from the flaming sphere, headed either towards the castle or towards you. Intermittent goutts of flame strike down from the cloudless heavens, smashing another section of the castle wall. Brave samurai fire a stream of arrows at the sphere, but all of them seem to burst into flame before they reach their target. From the looks of things, the struggle has been going on for many hours.

The palace seems to be holding out, at least for the time being. It certainly offers more safety than your current location, a point emphasized as another stream of fire comes shooting directly at you.

The obvious tactic is to head for a door in the palace on the wall opposite from the side the Oracle is currently attacking. Shosuro Medo points this out immediately and sets his horse at a gallop towards safety. The three-quarter of a li ride exposes the party to three attacks from the Oracle of Fire if they are on horses,

six if they are on foot. Dodging the first two fire blasts on horseback requires a TN 15 Agility + Horsemanship action, while the TN rises to 20 for the final blast before safety. It's easier to duck for cover or quickly change direction when on foot so it's easier to dodge at first. The first three blasts require a TN 10 Agility + Defense action, the second two TN 15, and the final one TN 20. Missing any dodge attempt results in the player taking 6k3 fire damage.

Once they reach the gate the party is allowed into the castle at once. Inside they find all in chaos, with many of the exposed timbers scorched or burnt to ash. The palace is a wreck, and everyone from the lowliest servant to Lord Hametsu himself is doing whatever they can to gather water from the cistern and throw it on the fires. Several Soshi shugenja are on the verge of exhaustion. In numerous places the stone floor has collapsed onto the hidden underground chambers below. The bodies of dead and wounded lie everywhere, many of them samurai from the walls who have been burned beyond recognition.

The Scorpions immediately press the party into helping them fight the fires. Fortunately, the Oracle's attacks abruptly cease after about thirty minutes and the lookouts report that he has withdrawn. The Scorpions immediately send out scouts to follow him and find out where he has gone. Meanwhile, Lord Hametsu calls the party, Medo, and his other advisors together for a council of war.

FLIGHT TO FIRE

If the party has sided with the Oracle, then this section applies to them. Their journey gets diverted much earlier, almost as soon as they have defeated Medo and his assassins and moved on towards the Oracle's mountain. Of course the Oracle is no longer there. However, if they have Tomuko with them, she has the figurine and he knows where they are at all times. The Oracle speaks to Tomuko through the statue in a voice only she can hear. She tells them that the Oracle has spoken to her and has moved from the mountain. He is now besieging Kyuden Shosuro and wants the party to bring her to him near the palace. Even as she tells them this the figurine glows white hot. Although it does not seem to bother her in the least, they can feel its heat on their faces and if they try to touch it, it burns them. That should be proof enough for them to heed the eta girl's words.

The journey takes the party towards the cave where the Oracle has set up his latest base of operations. The way is slow going because they have to follow the eta girl's sometimes vague directions. Five li from Kyuden Shosuro, the party can smell and see the smoke in the air and as night falls the sky over the palace is a dull orange. They arrive after the Oracle has withdrawn for the evening, having caused less damage than he might have if he were angry about the death of the eta girl (see above). Still, he gave the Scorpions a good fright and they have sent a group of assassins to see where he goes for the night so that they can send Shiriko against him when she is ready.

The assassins, led by a Soshi shugenja skilled in the magics of the Air, spot the party as they approach the cave. They immediately send one of their number back to Kyuden Shosuro

SOSHI SHUGENJA

Earth: 2
Water: 2
Perception: 3
Fire: 2
Air: 2
Awareness: 3
Void: 2

Skills: Calligraphy: 3, Lore: 2, Meditation 2, Shintao 2, Kenjutsu 1

School: Soshi Shugenja Rank 3

Weapons: Daisho

Spells: Commune, Summon, Counterspell, Benten's Touch, Call Upon the Wind, Know the Shadows, Mists of Illusion, Quiescence of Air, Tempest of Air, Way of Deception, Wind-Borne Slumbers, Wind's Distractions

to report the Oracle's location while the rest attack the party. The attack begins with an illusion created by the Soshi Shugenja:

As you march through the gloom drenched forest, suddenly a bright light flares to life in front of you. The Oracle of Fire stands before you, blocking the way. He raises a hand and in a booming voice says, "Go Back!" The eta girl cringes before him, hiding her eyes and whimpering in fear.

Of course this simple illusion will not fool the party for long, especially since it says nothing else and does not react to anything the party does. It is merely a ploy to distract them while the attackers move into position. As soon as the party realizes they have been tricked, the assassins open fire with yumi. There are four of them, plus the shugenja and they attack from the trees, protected by a web of darkness the shugenja has woven about them. Spotting the attackers in their hidden locations requires the PC to make a Perception roll, TN 20 before he or she can attack. Even then only missile weapons work as long as the assassins remain up in the foliage.

Once the party seeks cover the assassins come down from their roosts and attempt to meet the PCs in combat. They prefer to sneak through the shadows and attack from behind. Although not ninja, they are dressed in black. However, they have trained with Bayushi bushi, and are armed with katanas and protected by black breastplates. They maneuver with great skill and silence

through the forest to try and attack the party by surprise. This requires a Contested Roll, pitting the assassin's Agility + Stealth against the target's Awareness. Meanwhile the shugenja stays back, using his magic to interfere with the heroes, creating distractions that allow the really assassins to strike unseen.

The assassins attempt to kill the party first and then the girl, although if the eta is exposed for a long time they will not pass up an opportunity to strike her down. If the eta girl is ever wounded but not killed the Oracle becomes immediately aware of it. Three rounds later he bursts onto the scene and quickly drives the Scorpions off. However, he might hurt the PCs in the process, mistaking them for Tomuko's attackers. If the girl is killed, the Oracle comes and destroys the Scorpions quickly. Angry and saddened, he takes the party back to his cave with him.

ASSASSINS

Earth: 2
Willpower: 3
Water: 2
Perception: 3
Fire: 3
Air: 3
Reflexes: 4
Void: 1

Skills: Acrobatics 2, Acting 1, Defense 2, Disguise 1, Poison 2, Sleight of Hand 2, Shinobi 3, Kenjutsu 3

Honor: 1
Glory: 2
School: Shosuro Shinobi (Rank 3)
Weapons: Yumi and 20 arrows, Daisho

AFTERMATH

The party now either rests momentarily with the Oracle of Fire or in the questionable security of Kyuden Shosuro. If they are in the Oracle's cave, proceed to Chapter Nine, skipping Chapter Eight entirely (although the GM needs to read it so he or she knows what the Scorpions are up to). If they are with the Scorpions then play continues in Chapter Eight.

Chapter Eight: To Kill an Oracle

Overview

This chapter only applies to PCs who have decided to join forces with the Scorpion Clan against the Oracle of Fire. While meeting with Lord Hametsu and his advisers, they learn the full extent of the Scorpion Clan's plan to overthrow the Oracle and take his power for themselves and that they are now a key part of that plan.

Supper in the Ruins

Not long after sundown things finally begin to calm down in Kyuden Shosuro. The last of the fires is extinguished and Hametsu allows the defenders to rest. Most collapse where they stand, too tired to search out quarters that are probably mostly soot and ash now anyway. There is no rest for the party, however. Hametsu summons them to meet with him at once. An escort conducts them to the blackened audience chamber to plot and plan with the Shosuro daimyo.

You can scarcely recognize the elegant audience chamber in which you have met Lord Hametsu on previous occasions. The wooden floor is charred black and crunches ominously under your feet. Reed mats have been laid out across it in a vain attempt to restore some semblance of cleanliness and civility. The walls have all burned away, leaving only fire scarred wooden pillars with long sheets of silk thrown up between them for privacy. Unlike on previous occasions there are no servants offering food and drink while you wait, just a lone, silent guard who seems almost too exhausted to stand.

After about ten minutes of waiting, Hametsu-sama and his entourage pull aside one of the silk curtains and enter the room, obviously too hurried to worry about the traditional forms of courtesy and propriety. He has changed into a suit of armor and a fresh mask. The red lacquer seems almost divine in its cleanliness when compared to the soot-covered surroundings and



clothing of everyone else in the room. The only other person with so pristine an appearance is a Shosuro woman who follows Lord Hametsu into the room. Her red silk kimono and tiny red mask are spotless, only accentuating her great beauty amidst all this ugliness. Behind her come Shosuro Medo, Shosuro Juberu, and a man and a woman you do not recognize.

Lord Hametsu waits just long enough for the party to bow before he begins the meeting. He thanks the party for its role in killing the eta girl. They have done a great service for the Scorpion Clan and their help will not soon be forgotten. Now he has one final task for them, one for which the Shosuro family and the entire Scorpion Clan will be thanking their children's grandchildren in years to come. He expects and appreciates their continued cooperation in this matter. With that he turns the matter over to his advisor Juberu.

The GM should make it obvious to the party that the daimyo is not asking the party to help, he is ordering them. They are in it so deep they must see it to the end. From his point of view, Hametsu needs to be able to trust the party as much as if they were part of his own family. They must either become loyal

servants of the Scorpion Clan or die. They know too much to live on outside of his control. He is prepared to reward them handsomely for their loyalty, but any sign of disobedience and he does not hesitate to order their deaths.

Shosuro Juberu now takes over the meeting. First he introduces the other two Scorpions who followed him into the room (not the beautiful woman, the other two). The woman is Soshi Mariko, a powerful Soshi Shugenja and the man is Yogo Dontso, an equally powerful Yogo Shugenja. The two of them have been helping the Shosuro family formulate a plan to deal with the Oracle of fire. Juberu goes on to describe the plan to the party:

We do not have much time, so I shall be brief. Our learned cousins have studied the problem of this mad Oracle since the moment Shosuro Medo reported to us. Having consulted more, shall we say *private* resources, we have come up with a workable but dangerous plan. It seems that the focus of the Oracle's madness is indeed the Lady Shiriko. As strange as this may be, we shall use this obsession of his to undo him.

"The plan is quite simple, although the magics and rituals behind it are beyond your understanding. We must get Shiriko into the presence of the Oracle unharmed. We think this is entirely possible, if you are there to help facilitate it. The Oracle seems somewhat willing to speak with you about his desires. Therefore, you shall escort the Lady Shiriko to the Oracle. You must make sure that she gets close to him unharmed. The rest is up to her but for one small act.

"Once Shiriko is close to the Oracle, you must distract him somehow. Then Shiriko shall draw forth a specially prepared blade she has hidden on her person and stab the Oracle with it. This should slay the insane creature, returning its power to the Dragon from whence it came. Our wise scholars assure us that once the Dragon of Fire is made whole again it can easily choose another for its Oracle. Naturally the choice will be much wiser than the eta this insane mockery would have bestowed his power on.

"Our scouts have tracked the Oracle to a cave not far from here, less than an hour away. You and Shiriko must leave at once for the Oracle's cave. It will be impossible to affect this plan if he returns to attack Kyuden Shosuro tomorrow. We must strike now, while he recuperates." With that Juberu steps aside and gestures to the beautiful woman in the pristine kimono - Shosuro Shiriko. She bows to you, but does not say a word. Her hands remain tucked demurely into her sleeves as she bows, a perfect picture of female beauty and humility.

Juberu gives the party a few minutes to ask questions but is obviously impatient for them to get on their way. If the party has any suggestions to alter the plan that make it better without changing the fundamental aspects of it, he listens and even allows the party to make them. However, Lord Hametsu soon grows tired of this and orders the meeting ended and the mission begun at

once. The party is given fresh horses, an escort of four Scorpion horsemen to guide them, and they are sent on their way.

THE SCORPION'S TRUE PLAN

Juberu laid out the plan pretty much as the Scorpions devised it with a few exceptions. First of all, he does not mention that Shiriko has the Dagger of Shosuro in her possession. She keeps it hidden at all times within the folds of her kimono and will not reveal it until ready to strike. The Scorpions do not want anyone outside the Clan to know they are using this priceless mystic artifact. Secondly, Juberu lied about the anticipated effects of the ritual blade. It should kill the Oracle, but it should also steal his power and bestow it upon Shiriko. That's the plan anyway. He also failed to mention that a team of Scorpion Samurai following the party at a safe distance, in case they try to do anything stupid (like betray the clan).

AFTERMATH

The party is now on its way with Shiriko to the cave of the Oracle. An hour later and they're in Chapter Ten, skipping Chapter Nine altogether.



Chapter Nine: To Save an Oracle

Overview

Having safely escorted the eta girl back to the Oracle, they now meet with the man-god in order to decide what should become of both the girl and the Scorpions only to have the Scorpion Clan rudely interrupt the discussion and throw the party straight into Chapter Ten.

The Oracle

The Oracle's cave looks as though it was once little more than a depression in the side of a hill. The Oracle has obviously used his powers to increase its dimensions significantly. A perfectly round eight foot hole has been cut into the hill to allow entrance to the cave. The interior of the hill is now a hemisphere measuring some forty feet across, the walls perfectly smooth, black glass that dimly reflects the light given off by the familiar pair of fire pillars in the center of the room. Otherwise the room is completely featureless.

The Oracle stands at the center, between the two pillars. He wears a blackened kimono that might once have been white, torn and singed almost to the point of disintegration. His hair is covered in dirt and ash as is most of his skin. As you enter the cave he looks at you angrily, without recognition. That look changes to a smile of delight as soon as he sees the eta girl.

That's all assuming the girl is alive of course. If the party has brought the girl back alive then the Oracle is in very good spirits. For a moment or two he even manages to forget about the overwhelming feelings he has towards Shiriko and the Scorpion Clan. He thanks the party for returning the girl to him. He then speaks with her for a while, asking her to forgive him for scaring her and promising that soon she will be an Oracle, a person of great power and honor.



Then he turns to the party. He tells them that he attacked Kyuden Shosuro today and that tomorrow he plans to destroy it and all within it. He no longer cares to see Shiriko. He will simply have his vengeance and then make Tomuko Oracle. Once he is in the Celestial Heavens none of this will matter to him anymore. He can finally find peace. Now however he needs to rest. He asks the party to stay and guard the girl through the night while he sleeps in preparation for the morning's exertions.

Here the party has an opportunity to avert bloodshed, or at least they might think they do. They can try to convince the Oracle to forget about Shiriko and simply make the girl Oracle now and be done with it. Although not thrilled with the idea, it is possible that the party can indeed convince the Oracle of its merits. If the heroes suggest this idea to the Oracle, Tomuko supports it whole heartedly. The GM can even have her suggest it to the Oracle first and have her ask the party to help convince him that she's right.

TOMUKO SPEAKS OUT

Here for the first time the party gets to see some sense of why a young eta girl might actually be the right choice for Oracle of Fire. Up until this point Tomuko has seemed little more than a

scared child swept up in events beyond her control. Now she begins to show wisdom, compassion, and forgiveness beyond her years. She pleads with the Oracle to forget about Shiriko and taking vengeance on the Scorpions. They acted out of fear, fear of change, fear bred by their noble values. They deserve to be pitied for their close mindedness and cowardly hearts, not destroyed.

The Oracle listens to what Tomuko has to say, and both she and he look to the party to intervene. At this point the PC's should become involved in the debate over whether the Scorpions should be destroyed. In order to avoid arguing, among the NPCs, the GM should frame the debate so that whoever the party disagrees with does most of the talking. For example, if the party wants to take revenge on the Scorpions (a sentiment they would be justified in holding) then Tomuko debates the issue with them. If they want to spare the Scorpions then most of their conversation will be with the Oracle.

If the party allies with Tomuko, they can convince the Oracle to step down immediately and give his power to the eta child. If that happens then she will be beyond the ability of the Scorpions to harm her. If the party sides with the Oracle then he vows to level the castle in the morning, take his revenge on Shiriko, and then pass on his power to the girl. Whatever the decision, it is entirely moot with the Scorpion plan already in motion.

UNWELCOME GUESTS

Before the party can do anything else Shiriko and her escort arrive at the cave entrance. This is probably the first time they have seen her and everyone, the Oracle included, stares in shocked silence at the following tableau:

"Greetings, Great Oracle of Fire," says a distinguished female voice from the cave entrance. You look to see a beautiful woman in a bright red kimono of the Shosuro family. Her delicate mask scarcely conceals her fine features. You know immediately that this can only be one person: Shosuro Shiriko. She stands demurely, head bowed, hands properly tucked into the sleeves of her kimono. Behind her stand two Scorpion samurai, armed for battle, and outside the cave you catch a glimpse of firelight on the steel weapons of additional bushi. "My lord, I beg to speak with you," says the woman and the Oracle nods in agreement.

AFTERWARD

On to the final showdown in Chapter Ten, which picks up right where this left off.

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Chapter Ten: Shiriko Returns

Overview

One way or another, the party is now in the Oracle's cave at the same time as both Shiriko and her spurned lover. Obviously something very bad is about to happen. Whether or not it actually does depends upon what side the party takes in the matter. Within the space of just a few minutes it should all be over.

With Shiriko

This section assumes the party has traveled to the Cave with Shiriko and her fellow Scorpions. On the journey to the cave Shiriko speaks very little, her mind occupied with the upcoming confrontation. She does however make one thing clear to the party. As soon as she bows down and asks for the Oracle's forgiveness it is time for the PCs to make some sort of distraction so that she can strike. They must make sure to grab the Oracle's full attention.

The party arrives at the cave about an hour after they depart Kyuden Shosuro. There they find another Scorpion samurai in hiding, watching over the cave entrance. He reports that the Oracle is inside the cave and has not come out since he went in. Shiriko now commands that the party lead her into the cave, along with the four Bayushi samurai.

The Oracle's cave looks as though it was once little more than a depression in the side of a hill. The Oracle has obviously used his powers to increase its dimensions significantly. A perfectly round man-sized hole has been cut into the hill to allow entrance to the cave. The flickering light of fire seeps out of the hole into the night, casting shadows all about the forest. As you draw near you can hear the unmistakable voice of the Oracle muttering to himself although you cannot make out what he is saying.

As you draw near the hole you can see into the cave beyond. The interior is a hemisphere measuring some forty feet across, the walls perfectly smooth, black glass that reflects dimly the light

given off by the familiar pair of fire pillars in the center of the chamber. Otherwise the room is completely featureless. In the center, about twenty feet from the entrance you can see the Oracle of Fire, pacing back and forth over a ten foot area of the cave, talking to himself in what, as far as you tell, is utter gibberish. He wears a blackened kimono that might once have been white, torn and singed almost to the point of disintegration. His hair is covered in dirt and ash as is most of his skin.

The party can stand at the cave entrance and watch him all night if they wish and he does not notice them unless they prepare to attack him in some way. However, Shiriko presses behind them, urging them forward into the cave. As soon as they step in he turns upon them. Shiriko is not yet in sight, she holds back with her guards to wait and see how the Oracle reacts to the party's presence. He reacts rather badly.

As soon as the party enters the cave or makes their existence known in some fashion the Oracle whirls to face them. "How dare you disturb me!" he shouts, as a nimbus of flame surrounds him. The party has about ten seconds to start talking and identify themselves before he blasts them with a wall of fire. He holds off as long as what they have to say seems interesting. He recognizes them soon enough and that only makes him angrier. "You have betrayed me! Why should I spare your lives for another moment?" he bellows. They'd best introduce Shiriko pretty quick. If they don't, she steps forward in time to prevent the Oracle from incinerating the PCs.

Shiriko calls out to the Oracle "Greetings Great Oracle of Fire." All of the fury he had directed at you dissipates as his attention focuses entirely upon the beautiful Shosuro courtier. The fire that surrounds his body winks out like an extinguished candle. "My lord, I beg to speak to you," says Shiriko. The Oracle only nods, otherwise standing as still as a statue. Shiriko approaches him, her arms hidden in the folds of her kimono, her head bowed in supplication. It seems to take an eternity for her to cross the twenty feet or so that separate her from the insane demi-god. Just when she is about to come within striking distance he stops her.

"That's far enough," he says. "I shall allow you no closer lest you tempt me again." Shiriko stops and falls to her knees, you can hear the unmistakable sound of sobbing.

"I'm sorry my lord, I am not even worthy of your forgiveness. Still, I must ask it of you in hopes that you still love me, as I love you."

That's the sign. The moment has come for the party to make their distraction so Shiriko can strike the Oracle down. What they do is up to them. It will have to be something more than simply calling out the Oracle's name. He's too engrossed in the sight of Shiriko to even notice that the PCs are there. They can attack him, cast a spell, jump up and down and screech like birds or anything else that is too egregious or obnoxious to ignore.



Rather than killing the warriors, the Oracle has infused them with his dying rage. The four now turn on the party and Shiriko, trying their best to use their newfound strength, speed, and determination to avenge the Oracle. The party must fight these super-charged samurai before they can literally cut Shiriko loose from the Oracle. The party must hold them off for five rounds, as long as it takes for Shiriko's blade to finish its task. All the while the Oracle continues to spurt jets of flame towards the cave roof, crying out in agony.

If Shiriko gets her five rounds of quality time with the Oracle then her plan succeeds. The Oracle dies and the blade transfers his power directly into her. More on what that means exactly in Chapter Eleven. If the party fails and the Oracle manages to break free of Shiriko's grasp then he attacks them for all he's worth. They had all better run very fast because now that he's alert to the danger, there is no way any of them can stop him. The next day he returns to Kyuden Shosuro, burns it to the ground and then disappears. The party's final fate is up to the GM; the Oracle may be too consumed with destroying the Shosuro to bother with them, in which case, they can safely flee the province. If he decides to focus on them first, however, there is little they can do against his power. Such is the price of defying the Heavens.

As soon as the Oracle is distracted (and even if the party fails to distract him), Shiriko slips the Dagger of Shosuro from the sleeve of her kimono and plunges it into the unsuspecting Oracle's belly. He cries out in agony, a voice too deep and powerful to be human, and slumps to his knees. Shiriko holds the blade close, and pulls the Oracle to her to drive it home deeper. The Oracle's arms stretch out and streams of flame stream up and hit the ceiling then arc down towards the cave entrance. There they strike the four Scorpion samurai, engulfing them in flame.

WITH THE ORACLE

This section assumes the party is standing with the Oracle and follows directly upon the events in Chapter Nine.

The Oracle walks forward to meet Shosuro Shiriko in the center of the room, motioning for you to stay back. When they are about three feet apart she drops to her knees and says, "I'm sorry my lord, I am not even worthy of your forgiveness. Still, I must ask it of you in hopes that you still love me as I love you." Her

voice is full of tears and you can see that the Oracle is moved by her emotion, he bends down, hand outstretched to comfort her.

In a flash she withdraws her right hand from the sleeve of her kimono and before you can even utter a cry of warning plunges a black blade into the Oracle's belly. He cries out in agony and falls to the his knees beside Shiriko. Meanwhile the Scorpion samurai are already charging headlong across the cave towards you, determined to cut you down where you stand.

In the ensuing fight the party needs to get Shiriko away from the Oracle as soon as possible. They have five rounds to accomplish this task. If they can get past the samurai guards it is easy enough to strike at Shiriko from behind since all of her attention is focused on sucking the life and power out of the Oracle. If the party seems to have trouble figuring this out have Tomuko explain it to them in no uncertain terms. Any attack that does more than 10 points of damage to Shiriko breaks the Oracle free from Shiriko. The problem is getting past the samurai who are defending her.

If freed, the Oracle ends the matter quickly, engulfing the Scorpion in flame and then slowly burning Shiriko alive until all that remains is the echo of her screams and the Dagger of Shosuro. The Oracle thanks the party for its help and play proceeds into the final chapter.

AFTERWARD

Either the party has helped the Scorpions win the day or saved the Oracle from their machinations. Either way the world is going to have a new Oracle of Fire by morning. Chapter Eleven gives all the details.



STATS FOR SHIRIKO

Earth: 2
Willpower: 3
Water: 2
Perception: 3
Fire: 3
Air: 3
Awareness: 5
Void: 2
Skills: Acting 4, Courtier 3, Etiquette 3, Knife 4, Poison 2, Seduction 4, Sincerity 5, Sleight of Hand 4, Stealth 2, Tea Ceremony 3

Honor 1.2
Glory 3
Advantages: Dangerous Beauty, Heartless
School: Shosuro Courtier 4
Weapons: Dagger of Shosuro (2k2 damage, paralyzes victim as long as it is in them, sucks one rank of Void per round until dead)

STATS FOR SHIRIKO'S ESCORTS

Earth 3
Fire 3
Water 2
Air 4
Void 2
Skills: Kenjutsu 4, Defense 2, Archery 1, Stealth 2, Acting 2, Iaijutsu 3
Honor 1.5
Glory 2.1
School: Bayushi Bushi (rank 4)
Weapons: Daisho

FIRE INSPIRED SAMURAI

Earth 3
Fire 5
Agility 6
Water 3
Air 4
Void 2
Skills: Kenjutsu 5, Archery 1, Stealth 2, Acting 2, Iaijutsu 2
Honor 1
Glory 2
School: Bayushi Bushi (rank 3)
Weapons: Daisho

Chapter Eleven: Ramifications

Overview

Here is sorted out all the loose ends and the various possible scenarios that result from the events of this adventure, including who the new Oracle of Fire is and whether or not Kyuden Shosuro remains standing.

The Oracle Has His Way

If the heroes managed to stop Shiriko and save the Oracle then events proceed pretty much as the Oracle intended them to before he ever met Shiriko. With Shiriko dead his madness leaves him. Without ado he passes on his power directly to the eta girl Tomuko, a process the party is invited to watch if they so desire.

The Oracle of Fire clothes his body in flames and begins to transform before your very eyes. The flame seems at first to consume his flesh but it soon becomes apparent that it is in fact his flesh which is transforming into fire until all that remains is a human shaped spirit of flame. Tomuko steps forward and kneels in front of the fiery apparition. The Oracle places a burning hand on Tomuko's head and an aura of fire surrounds the girl. She kneels calmly, eyes closed in prayer. Slowly the fiery figure of the Oracle begins to dim as the halo of flame around Tomuko grows brighter and stronger. After about a minute the Oracle finally fades away into nothingness while Tomuko shines as bright as the sun.

She rises to her feet and opens her mouth, arms stretched out towards the heavens. With the rushing of tornado winds the flaming aura swirls into the girl's mouth as if it were water caught in a whirlpool. In but a moment the girl has consumed the Oracle's fire. She turns toward you and smiles. Not the childish grin of a young girl but a smile of wisdom beyond her age. A smile Shinsei himself might have given a precocious student. The new Oracle of Fire has come to Rokugan.

The new Oracle's first action is to thank the party for its help and assure them that if they ever have need of her wisdom she shall happily share it with them. She then takes the Dagger of Shosuro from where it sits (or from any character who might have picked it up) and says that she shall return to this to the Scorpion Clan so that they might know what has become of their plans. With that she disappears before their very eyes, leaving them alone in the cave, unsure of their next move.

The Oracle does indeed return the Dagger of Shosuro and with it delivers a message to the Scorpions that the party is now under her protection. If any harm comes to them, she will no where to find the culprits and act accordingly. This warning serves to ensure that the Scorpions will not try to kill the party immediately as they might otherwise be inclined to do. Even so, the entire Shosuro family now has a burning desire to take their vengeance on the party, and if anyone knows how to exact revenge without drawing unwanted attention it is the Scorpion Clan. On the plus side, once the story of what took place gets out, the party will find themselves more welcome among the spiritually oriented clans like the Phoenix and Dragon.





The Oracle Defeated

Should Shiriko manage to overcome the Oracle with her enchanted blade then the power is indeed hers.

The Oracle's screams cut off abruptly. An aura of darkness emanates from the blade; the black radiance grows until it encompasses both figures, a sphere of darkness six feet in diameter. Then it collapses in on itself and there stand Shiriko, alone. She is now dressed in the kimono of the Oracle of Fire. In her left hand, she holds the black blade. She lets it drop to the floor as she raises her arms above her head and lets out a cry of triumph. Flames lick forth from her mouth, jets of fire shoot from the tips of her hands.

If the party was on Shiriko's side then any Oracle empowered samurai they might have been fighting simply collapse in a heap, dead. They are now alone in the cave and can make their way back to Kyuden Shosuro on their own. If they were fighting against the Scorpions then they have to keep on fighting until all their opponents are dead. Then they are free to go their own way, knowing that the Scorpion Clan now wants their heads and seems to have an Oracle of Fire under their control.

In fact, Shiriko is not under the control of the Scorpions at all. She is scarcely in control of herself. She transports herself back to Kyuden Shosuro to report her success, returning the Dagger of Shosuro. However, headaches and random spasms of pain plague her constantly over the next few hours. It seems the heart of the Dragon is not agreeing with her. She retires to her quarters. A few hours later an explosion rips through that part of the castle. Her quarters destroyed, there is no sign of Shiriko. No one knows if she is dead or has simply disappeared.

The truth is, Shiriko has fled to the mountains, away from the sight of mortal eyes. She needs to spend time learning to control the forces at work within her. Eventually, she does learn to control them, but only by coming to terms with what it really means to be an Oracle. Whether or not this means giving up her loyalties to the Scorpion Clan remains to be seen. It hardly matters to the party however, they have done their job and Lord Hametsu honors them appropriately, even adopting them into his family if they so desire. In any case, they now have the favor of the Scorpions, a powerful tool in this world.

The Oracle Disappointed

If the heroes manage to save the Oracle but not the eta girl, or failed to kill him but killed the eta girl, the Oracle is profoundly depressed. The only difference is whether or not the party lives to see that result. If the party helped the Oracle then surviving should not be an issue. The Oracle kills Shiriko and the Scorpions left alive with her and then moves on to level Kyuden Shosuro. Their plan having failed, Hametsu and his advisors have already fled the palace. The Oracle's vengeance is costly but not crippling to the family since everything and everyone of importance has already been removed.

The Oracle still needs to find a successor. Now more than ever he wishes to end his existence and travel to the Celestial Heavens. If the party helped him, he might even choose one of them as his successor. Of course, that means retiring the character in question, and is a judgment call best left up to the GM. Otherwise the Oracle spends the next few months trying to find a suitable soul for the task and this time he tells no one of what he plans. He eventually chooses another lower class child, a hinin boy from the lands of the Phoenix.





SHOSURO SHIIKO



ETA GIRL



**SHOSURO
HAMETSU**



ORACLE OF FIRE



SHOSSURO MEDO

Dramatis Personae – Void in the Heavens

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Void in the Heavens™

"To be an Oracle is not an honor. It is a burden. It is more than the burden of heart or mind, or the burden of laboring to serve your Lord. To truly understand the nature of an Oracle is to accept a weight on your very soul..."

– Isawa Kaede, Acolyte of Void

The Five Oracles are among the most powerful creatures in Rokugan. They are alien, emotionless, lifted above the petty politics of the Empire and given the heart of a Celestial Dragon. Each one is chosen by their predecessor to take on the burden of immortality. Given a piece of the Dragon's soul to tend, they forsake all memories and ties to their past. Those who are chosen must leave behind their mortal life and take up study and contemplation, to enlighten the Dragon's soul. They forget their human past, and become one with the Heart of the Dragon. They no longer feel the pains of anger, grief, revenge... or love.

Until now.

The Oracle of Fire has gone mad, screaming through the heavens above Shiro no Shosuro, raining death and fire down upon the Scorpion provinces. If he is not stopped, the lands for a thousand li will be ash and coal, burning beneath the heavens as a sacrifice to the Oracle's insanity.

Only the bravest samurai dare to face a Dragon.

- Action-oriented, filled with the intrigue and danger, this adventure contains a glimpse into the mystery and magic of the Oracles of Rokugan, and the awesome power of the Celestial Dragons they serve.
- Suitable for low to mid-level player characters of all clans.
- Requires a copy of the Legend of the Five Rings basic rules. Way of the Scorpion is optional, but recommended.



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