



Legend of the Five Rings Interactive Storyline Collectible Card and Role Playing Games

May 2014 Special Edition

The New Imperial Herald and Getting it Right

By Dave Laderoute

Greetings, samurai of Rokugan! As you may recall, back in the Holiday Season version of the Imperial Herald, I said, "this will be the last time you see this format". Fast forward to today, May 2014, and here we still are, with another PDF version of the Herald. What gives?

Well, our plans haven't changed. This form of the Imperial Herald, which mimics the old, snail-mail-delivered paper version, remains an "interim" format. We're still using it because our intended format for the Herald is still in the process of being finalized. This will be a fully-online, interactive Imperial Herald, integrated into a new Imperial Assembly website and generally similar to a "blog". We believe that moving the Imperial Herald to such a format will make it more dynamic, interactive with its readers and, most importantly, immediately relevant. One of the big criticisms of the old, hardcopy Herald was that articles written for it would often be "stale-dated"; that is, effectively old news, or even obsolete, by the time they reached you, the reader. Yes, strategy articles for the collectible card game are great; they're less great, though, if they describe a strategies designed for a game environment that no longer exists because a full expansion has come out in the meantime.

So, the Imperial Herald is going to change. However, change of this type means making a lot of specific and pretty technical things happen, and those things have to happen *right*. It's the *right* part we've been focused on here; a lot of work has been going on these past months ensuring that the Imperial Assembly website, and the Imperial Herald that resides within it, not only works properly in a technical sense, but also that it works in a way that you, the user, will find easy and enjoyable to use. I'm going to take this opportunity to give you a taste of what you can expect.

First of all, without being a member of the Imperial Assembly, the Legend of the Five Rings official "fan club", you'll be able to access some of the material on the site. Most



notably, you'll have access to general articles and items about the L5R collectible card game, role playing game and other, associated game products. I'll be honest—the main focus of much of this material will be to whet your appetite for more, and encourage you to join the Imperial Assembly as a paid member. With a subscription, you'll be able to log in and access much more of the site, including more extensive and detailed articles about all of the various games and the overall game setting and story. And, since you'll specify your membership in a particular Clan when you subscribe, you'll also have access to some Clan-specific materials not visible to members of other Clans (although, of course, you can choose to purchase multiple subscriptions from different Clans, if you wish!)

The website will also function as your "one-stop shop" for things like renewing your subscription, purchasing and redeeming Koku for cards, and specifying your particular Stronghold Store. Remember, the more subscriptions attached to a specific Stronghold Store, the higher the "level" of that store—and the greater the rewards it gets to support Legend of

the Five Rings game play! Eventually, we envision the Imperial Assembly website becoming your main avenue for obtaining news and other information about all things related to the L5R line of games and their setting. We also want to be able to do cool things with and for you, including making wallpapers available for your desktop, conducting player votes and...much more, which I'll refrain from spoiling for now!

And this brings us back to getting it *right*. This is more than just a simple website; it also incorporates a database of players, a Koku database and a store database, and will also include comments on articles, frequently-updated content—in other words, a complex and comprehensive exercise in information management. As I write this, we're almost there, at that point of *right*. Once we are, we'll be rolling out the new site with appropriate fanfare, and you'll then be able to enjoy a whole new aspect of Legend of the Five Rings and the games, fiction, cosplay and other activities it includes. And don't worry about your current subscription; it will roll over onto the new site.

Finally, I want to emphasize that we will continue to want content from you. We've put out the call for submissions before, and have used some of the terrific material that's been sent our way; a lot of it remains on-hold, however, pending the roll-out of the new Imperial Herald. We definitely remain interested in getting new stuff from you, however, and our need for articles and features is only going to increase. So, if you've been holding off on writing something because things haven't seemed very active, go ahead and put virtual pen to paper. The Imperial Herald is going to have a voracious appetite for new content once we get it launched in its new form, so you'll have lots of opportunity to get your words into print!

In the meantime, if you have something you want to submit, or just have any questions, feel free to send them to heraldeditor@alderac.com.

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The Coming Storm

By Dave Laderoute

We've got two new cards from *The Coming Storm* to preview for you in this edition. The wily Otomo Suikihime recruits other Clans' Courtiers to support your political schemes, while a noble Naga Savior fills the role of a powerful Scout!



Politics are, of course, as much of a way of life in Rokugan as is warfare. In fact, as any Rokugani courtier would tell you, politics in the Emerald Empire *are* warfare, with words forming weapons as keen and deadly as the sharpest steel. Few politicians in recent Rokugani history have been as accomplished in the cut-and-thrust of courtly battle as Otomo Suikihime, Governor of the Second City, the Empire's preeminent settlement in the Colonies. Now, if you're a Crane, Scorpion, Phoenix or Dragon clan player, you can have the cunning Suikihime join your cause and dramatically increase the stable of political Personalities available to your decks.

Suikihime Sensei is, of course, just that—a Sensei, a card that is neither part of your Dynasty or Fate deck that starts in play. It immediately modifies your Stronghold's attributes in several key ways. Once per turn, by bowing the Sensei, you can have a non-Unique Courtier not from your Clan swear

fealty to you prior to entering play as long as you don't already control any Personalities with that Clan alignment. He permanently gains your Clan alignment, so even the Loyal keyword is no impediment to recruiting him. Moreover, you will pay only his printed Gold Cost, rather than the usual 2 Gold "penalty" for recruiting from out-of-Clan, can ignore his Honor Requirement, and can Proclaim him as you recruit him. Finally, once he's in play, anything that checks for Clan Alignment will "see" yours, in addition to any other Alignment(s) he might have. So, if you're a Scorpion Clan player, you could Recruit, say, a Crane Clan Courtier and attach the [Ancestral Armor of the Scorpion](#) to him, while a Phoenix Clan player could Recruit, say, a Dragon Clan Courtier and still gain the Gold discount for Equipping him with the [Firestorm Legion](#). Cards like [Chaos of Battle](#) also become a little more attractive, because more Clan Alignments means a stronger Force bonus from its effect.

Perhaps even more important, however, is the dramatic increase in deck-building choices players from these four clans will enjoy. Skilled Duelists like [Kakita Amiki](#) and [Doji Razan](#) become available, even if you don't have the Family Honor to Recruit them normally; you can supercharge your economy with Personalities like [Daidoji Soken](#) and [Ide Hinobu](#); Dishonor becomes much more feasible for non-Scorpion players with Personalities like [Bayushi Shizuka](#) and [Shosuro Hotaka](#). In general, keep an eye out in future expansions for non-Unique Courtiers you can add to your decks and power them up! Just remember, though, that once you recruit someone from a particular clan, the Sensei won't work with Personalities from that Clan anymore. The Sensei lends itself to a "super-friends" approach to deck-building, with Courtiers from various Clans joining yours—so choose your out-of-clan Courtiers carefully!

There is a downside, however. Your Stronghold's Gold Production is decreased by 1, meaning you will need to re-evaluate your entire Gold scheme. Holdings like [Jade Pearl Inn](#), [Suana Dojo](#) and [Jade Works](#), or the new cards [Summer Court](#) and [Voice of Experience](#) all become good candidates, as will any future 3 Gold Cost Holdings that are released. After all, there's no point having access to all those terrific Courtiers, if your deck's economy doesn't work!

The Naga have long been fierce opponents of "The Foul", their term for both the evil darkness of the Shadowlands and the existential menace of The Nothing. Zenathaar epitomizes that opposition, being both a Savior of her people and a Warrior of the Bright Eye, the Sun. The blunt fact that she simply won't join a player who controls any Personalities with the Shadowlands keyword makes this abundantly clear. But for those who can Recruit her, she is a powerful addition to just about any deck, but particularly those that take advantage of the Scout keyword.

At just 4 Gold, Zenathaar offers an impressive 3 Force and 3 Chi—an excellent ratio of Force or Chi to Gold Cost. And while there is (currently) no way to Proclaim her, her 3 Personal Honor gives her access to any action that benefits from such a high value. For example, [Marshal Your Strength](#) pumps her to a remarkable 5 Force and 5 Chi, or 6 and 6 if she's opposed, while [Seppun's Blessed Blade](#) makes her 6 Force and 5 Chi for as long as she wields this powerful weapon! And don't forget that, thanks to her Trait, multiple copies of her will add a +1 Personal Honor bonus to each other (though not to themselves), so even two copies can dramatically increase the effectiveness of these cards. She also extends the effect of this Trait to other personalities with the Naga Keyword, such as [Mirumoto Shikei](#) and [Moto Naleesh](#). Somewhat ironically, given her Flavor Text, she even increases the Personal Honor of [The Dark Naga](#); maybe she's helping him to see the error of his ways!



Perhaps more significant than her Trait, however, is her Scout Keyword. Scouts have already proven to be a powerful force in Ivory Edition, and Zenathaar only adds to their potency. She could certainly find a home in Crane Clan decks using [Akagi Sensei](#), but don't discount her usefulness to Crab, Lion, Mantis and even Unicorn, all of whom have suites of Scout Personalities. Lion, in particular, would see great benefit from a Scout with a high Personal Honor, that only gets higher with multiple copies.

Finally, Zenathaar offers an interesting Battle Action—the ability to move a Naga Personality Home, which can be taken from Home. Scout decks have proven to make great use of movement and Zenathaar broadens that, though only for Naga Personalities. Again, this suggests that multiples of her would be most useful; one Zenathaar can move another of her Home, perhaps after the second copy has bowed as a cost to some Action, or because you've over-committed forces while attacking a particular battlefield and want to bring her back Home, straight, to defend on your opponent's turn. She can also move herself Home, but be wary—her Action isn't Tireless, so she can't use it while she's bowed!

Your First Kotei

By Dave Laderoute

Many readers of the Imperial Herald are old hands at playing in Kotei and other major events. However, Ivory Edition has attracted a lot of new players to the game, so we're offering some insight as to what to expect at a major L5R event, as well as a few survival tips!

So you've decided to attend [your first Kotei](#) (or other, major L5R CCG event). Congratulations! You're in for a lot of fun, playing the game with some great people. It can be intimidating, though. Most of these people seem to take the whole thing as naturally as breathing, while your stomach is knotted up looking at all those tables sitting ready, waiting for players to pair up and engage in battle. So, let's take a few minutes at look at the anatomy and conduct of a Kotei (which, again, can apply to any major event, such as the World Championships at GenCon or in Europe).

First of all, L5R tournaments (like those of many other CCGs) are run in two basic phases. In the first phase, so-called Swiss pairing is used to establish who will advance to the second phase, which is often referred to as "the cut". In Swiss pairing (which is derived from chess tournaments), players are paired against one another in a series of rounds, which are 45 minutes long. In the first round of play, the pairings are randomly determined, usually by whatever computer software

is being used to manage the event. In subsequent rounds, winners will play winners from the previous rounds, while losers will play losers from the previous round. That means that, no matter how well or poorly you do, you get to keep playing cards! Within each of those winning and losing brackets, pairings are generally determined by "strength of schedule". Without going into great detail, "strength of schedule" is simply a measure of how well your various previous opponents during the tournament have done. The rationale is that, if your opponents are doing well, then you've played better players and should, therefore, be paired against likewise stronger opponents. The number of rounds of Swiss required to establish a clear winner can be determined mathematically, but our [Floor Rules](#) specify a particular number of rounds depending on the number of players in the event.

Swiss pairing does have one quirk, though. It depends on having an even number of players to work properly. If the event

has an odd number of players, though, we end up with a lone player stuck without an opponent. This leads to what's called a "bye". If you're the odd player out, then you "get the bye", which means you get an automatic win for the round. Sounds great, right? Well, yes and no. The "bye" actually represents the results of an imaginary game, in which you win against an opponent who himself has no wins. That weakens that thing called "strength of schedule", which could have ramifications later in the tournament if things are close. However, it's still a win, so just having the misfortune of getting the bye in an event with an odd number of players doesn't mean you're out of contention for the big win at the end.

So, you play your way through phase one, the Swiss pairings. If you've done well, you may find yourself advancing into phase two, "the cut". Congratulations! That means you're playing more cards! The number of players who "make the cut" is, again, a function of how many players are participating in the event. The "cut" is "single elimination" until only the top

8 players are left; that means, if you're playing in, say, Top 32 or Top 16, and you lose, you're out of the tournament. The same is true in the Top 8, the Top 4 and the Finals (the Top 2), except a modified system, based on playing 2 out of 3 games in a 75 minute round, is normally used. Once all this is done, we have a winner, the Kotei is over and now it's time to socialize!

Okay, so that's the mechanical conduct of the event. There are some other points worth noting, however:

- Yes, you're playing cards and trying to win, but L5R is a social activity, a game intended to be played for fun. REMEMBER THAT and DON'T take your losses personally. Win or lose, you'll find L5R players are generally a very friendly bunch. Don't hesitate to ask an experienced opponent for some comments on your deck and how you played it—this is a valuable way of improving your game.
- Remember to be polite and to treat your opponents with respect. Sometimes, the game will not go your way; don't allow to make you lose your cool and become do or say things you'll end up regretting. This means refraining from any sort of verbal abuse or harassment or any use of profanity. The best rule here is the “Golden” one—always treat others as you'd like to be treated.
- No matter how much you love the game, playing round after round of L5R can be gruelling. Make sure you keep yourself fed and hydrated, and take frequent breaks between rounds, preferably in fresh air and sunshine. These breaks are a great chance to do some more socializing with other players, too.
- In that vein, wear comfortable clothing. If you happen to attending an event at which there's a costume contest, and you're wearing a costume, make sure you bring a



change of comfortable clothes. Unless your costume is, itself, very comfortable to wear, you may find yourself regretting that craft foam and duct tape samurai armor, no matter how cool it looks!

- If you're old enough, and there's alcohol being served at or near the event, we strongly suggest you save your imbibing for after you've finished playing cards. In any case, drink responsibly. Enough said.
- Note that, if you achieve a high placing in the Kotei, you may be asked to [fill out a deck list](#), detailing the cards in your deck. This serves several purposes, including allowing other players to see what decks are doing well in the environment, but also to allow the game's Designers to see such decks and if there are any potential problems lurking in the available cards.
- Make sure you have everything you need to play when you sit down at the table. This includes your deck, of course, but also things like a token to represent the Imperial Favor, dice or a pencil and paper to track your

Family Honor, and dice or tokens to represent bonuses and penalties to things like Force and Chi. If you have placed your cards into deck sleeves, you should make sure you have some extras of the particular sleeves you're using, so you can replace any that get damaged during the course of the day.

- If you are uncertain, concerned or uncomfortable about anything, or have any questions, don't hesitate to speak to the Tournament Organizer or one of his assistants. In particular, if questions come up during the play of the game, feel absolutely free to call on a Judge to assist you. These people will be made clear to you at the beginning of the event and they are there to help you, and ensure you have a good time!
- Finally, there are often “side events” going on. These can be official events, like the Glory contests run at a Kotei, or they can be events put on by the organizers. Such events commonly include “second chance” CCG tournaments, designed so that those who don't make the cut in the main event can keep playing, often for cool prizes. They can also include more esoteric things, like haiku contests or charity auctions. Make sure you participate in some of these, too, as they can be lots of fun!

[The Floor Rules](#) and the [Code of Bushido](#) will give you much more details about the detailed conduct of a Kotei or other major L5R event. In the end, though, the message is simple—be courteous and polite, accept both your wins and losses with good grace, but most of all, have fun and get to know some of the great people who play this game!

Sword and Fan

By Rob Hobart

Rob Hobart gives us a sneak peek at *Sword and Fan*, a new supplement for the Legend of the Five Rings Role Playing Game coming this summer.

Sword and Fan is the latest sourcebook for L5R 4th Edition, scheduled for release in June. We finished layout for this book some time ago (we're working on *Book of Void* now), and are excited to finally see it heading out to the game-playing public. Our freelancers and playtesters had a lot of fun working on this one and hopefully you will find it equally so.

This book deals with the two fields of conflict that are central to a Rokugani samurai's life: war and politics. Of



course, we've dealt with both of these subjects plenty of times before in the 4th Edition line, but there are many aspects of both which we haven't explored yet and this book gave us the chance to do so. War alone or politics alone might not be broad enough topics to fill an entire book, but put them together and there's more than sufficient inspiration – in fact, the initial submissions from our freelancers were so expansive that we had to both expand the book (from 200 to 216 pages) and trim back some of the material to make it fit.

Thematically, we built *Sword and Fan* around inspiration from two of Rokugan's great works of literature, the legendary *Book of Sun Tao* and Otomo Madoka's political derivation from it, *The Subtlety of the Court*. The first half of the book is built around the “Sword” theme, with four chapters addressing many different aspects of Rokugani warfare, while the second half is the “Fan” theme with three chapters about court and politics.

Chapter One deals with Grand Strategy – the theory of war, large scale maneuvers of armies, the life of a general and command staff in the field. It also reviews some of the Empire's most famous generals and their campaigns. Chapter Two moves down to the lower level of warfare to talk about things like tactics and formations (there's an extensive write up of the various formations used by each of the Great Clans). This chapter also describes a host of rituals and traditions associated with warfare – things like taking heads, battlefield duels,

tattooing, honorable and dishonorable acts, and so forth. Plus, we added a discussion of how to add depth and detail to the Mass Battle rules; this is something many GMs find challenging, since the Mass Battle mechanics are so abstract. Just rolling Wounds and throwing out the occasional Heroic Opportunity can be boring, but there are many ways to add drama and make Mass Battle more personal for the player characters.

Chapter Three deals with cavalry warfare and the care and training of horses. These are topics we really wanted to hit in Great Clans and the Book of Water, but we were never able to work them into those books, so *Sword & Fan* was a great opportunity to finally address these things in depth. The chapter presents a complete history of cavalry in the Empire, both before and after the return of the Unicorn, and describes the specialized cavalry units of each clan.

Finally, Chapter Four – entitled simply “Enemies” – looks at the legal and social customs involving war between clans and against outside factions. The chapter discusses the legal and social protocols of declaring, waging, and concluding wars between clans, as well as the special considerations of making war against nonhumans, gaijin, and the Shadowlands.

The second half of the book, the “Fan” portion, contains three chapters. Chapter Five discusses the Empire's rules of civility and etiquette, everything from the expectations of hosts to the importance of fashion in court. It also examines the art of the insult, the history and traditions of the Tea Ceremony, and the legal and social traditions of inheritance. All of these, of course, are part of the intricate dance of civilization in the Rokugani courts.

Chapter Six, perhaps the longest chapter in the book, describes the seasonal traditions associated with court and politics, such as the inception of new daimyo during the spring and of course the annual tradition of the Winter Court. The customs and traditions of Winter Court have not received much coverage in 4th Edition and are scattered across many books from previous editions, all of which are out of print. This book has allowed us to collect and present all this information for newer players (and put it all in one place for the veterans like me). The chapter discusses everything from the traditional physical layout of a Winter Court to the customary entertainments, as well as the practice of matchmaking – a major focus of every Winter Court. Finally, we present the histories and game statistics of an array of famous diplomats, courtiers, artists, and social trend-setters from all eras of the Empire's history, suitable for use in any campaign.

The Fan section concludes with Chapter Seven, which discusses the “outsiders” of Rokugani politics – ronin, monks, nonhumans, gaijin, and so forth. The challenges of being a ronin in Winter Court, the odd position of monks in the political order, the subtle schemes of Shadowlands infiltrators – all these things can be found here.

The new mechanics for this book are all located at the back in a single Appendix. This format was introduced in the Elemental series of supplements and has generally been well-received, so we've now extended it to all the books. And what preview would be complete without a sample of the game mechanics?



Tsuru's Legion

Created a few years prior to the Clan War, this unit was founded by Hida Tsuru, younger brother of Clan Champion Hida Kisada. He created a legion of cavalry trained to combine speed and power, delivering overpowering strikes to enemy lines. Over time this force became known as Tsuru's Legion, a name it retained after the death of its founder. In modern times the Legion is a semi-independent strike force used by the Clan Champion, and stands outside the normal structure of the Crab armies.

New Alternate Path: Tsuru's Legion [Bushu]

- **Technique Rank:** 2
- **Replaces:** Hida Bushi 2, Hiruma Bushi 2
- **Requirement:** Horsemanship 3
- **Special:** Admission to Tsuru's Legion adds a steed (Rokugani pony) to your outfit if you do not already possess one.
- **Technique: *Overrun*** – The cavalry of Tsuru's Legion are trained to deliver decisive attacks at the critical moment of a battle. When you are mounted, you may perform the Knockdown maneuver for one less Raise and you may spend a Void Point to add +Xk0 to an attack roll with a weapon, where X is your mount's Strength.

Winter Court 4

By Dave Laderoute

Samurai of Rokugan!

Her Divine Majesty Iweko I, Most Blessed of Tengoku and Radiant Defender of the Empire, requests and requires that all Clans select their most able samurai and present them on the first day of the month of Hida as their esteemed ambassadors to the Imperial Winter Court. The Court, to be held in Toshi Ranbo, will end in the month of Fu Leng. It will deal with many matters of great import to the Empire. Foremost among these weighty affairs will be the selection of the Imperial Heir, but there will be myriad other issues to be addressed as well, all vital to the well-being of the glorious Emerald Empire. So it is proclaimed by the Miya, on behalf of the Splendid Empress, Embodiment of the Celestial Heavens in Ningen-do.



The above missive has been issued by the Imperial Throne and promulgated throughout Rokugan. It is up to you, now, to assume the role of a Rokugani samurai and represent your favored clan or faction in the Imperial Winter Court. There, you will play a character seeking to gain honor, glory and material gain on your clan's behalf, while keeping your adversaries from doing the same. Success will bring your character much honor and praise in turn—while failure can mean shame, ignominy or even the finality of seppuku, the Three Cuts.

Beginning on or about December 1, 2014, AEG will once again be conducting the Imperial Winter Court "play by forum" role playing game event. For those who may not be familiar with such an event, players—that is, you—will assume the roles of samurai, including bushi, shugenja and courtiers, from the Great Clans, the various Minor Clans, the monastic orders and even lordless ronin in an online role playing game. Interaction will be via posts made by players in a forum set up to represent the Imperial Court of Toshi Ranbo and its surroundings. These posts will be made by players, in the personae of player characters (PCs), and by Game Masters (GMs), representing non-player characters (NPCs). GMs will also initiate various events that may occur during the event and complicate life for the PCs. Essentially, you will post "in character" and receive "in character" responses, as you maneuver your way through the turbulent political landscape of the Imperial court. Your aim will be to gain honor, prestige and other rewards for your clan (and, if you're so inclined, yourself), while seeking to thwart the ambitions of other PCs and their clans. The players and clans that perform the best will have the greatest influence on the ongoing story of Rokugan, as we continue moving forward in Ivory Edition and towards the game's twentieth anniversary.

Objectives

The foremost and overall, real-life objective is of Winter Court 4 to give our dedicated players of the Legend of the Five Rings Role Playing Game (RPG) a major opportunity to affect the storyline of the game, while having fun. The players of the collectible card game (CCG) get numerous such opportunities, of course, but the nature of the RPG tends to not allow its players the same chance to participate in the greater story. RPG play tends not to be competitive, except in the sense of the players against the story and characters created by the GM. Therefore, there are normally no "winners" or "losers", at least in any sense that can reasonably be objectively determined. The CCG has a tremendous advantage here—if you play, say, a Crab Clan deck at a major CCG tournament and win, then the Crab Clan has likewise won and stands to reap whatever benefits that tournament may have offered as a story outcome. It's much harder to run an RPG event and, at the end of it, objectively say "the Crab Clan won". Winter Court 4, like its predecessors, will attempt to create a competitive (but, again, fun!) environment, and use a mix of both objective and subjective measures to determine which players and clans have "won". This is obviously much more complex than a CCG event, which is why we're starting planning and preparation now, in May, for an event that doesn't even begin until December.

The other objectives of Winter Court 4 are primarily "in-game"; that is, there are going to be a variety of story objectives the players and clans will be trying to achieve. We're going to be coy about these for now, as some are still quite nebulous and depend on the results of intervening activities, such as those at Origins, GenCon and other major events. We simply want to keep others under wraps until the right time to reveal them, in order to enhance the fun and excitement for everyone involved. What we can say now, as alluded to by the Empress in her missive above, is that Winter Court 4 will have a major impact in the final selection of the Imperial Heir who will ascend once Iweko has ceased to be Empress. Choosing to support either Iweko Seiken or Iweko Shibatsu, and then executing the political scheming and maneuvering to try nudge your chosen candidate closer to the Throne will be a key part of Winter Court 4, and will require you to exercise all of your political skills and instincts.

Lessons Learned

This is the fourth such Winter Court event run by AEG, and will draw extensively on lessons learned in the previous three. One of the most important is that everything that occurs will be "canon", in the sense that it will become part of the official story of Rokugan. Of course, we at AEG reserve the right to disallow or change things that either make no sense (sorry, folks, but [Chiisai](#) will never ascend to the Throne!) or that would work better for the greater story in a different way. And, while every greeting and shared conversation over tea or sake will, in fact, become canon, it's obviously the major events and outcomes that will continue to echo through the story after Winter Court 4 is done. So, role players, here is your chance to leave a lasting impression on Rokugan!

We're also "taking aboard" some other key lessons from past Winter Court events:

- Winter Court is busy—as in, by the end, there will be thousands of posts amounting to hundreds of thousands of words. The vast majority of this stuff will be interesting but almost certainly inconsequential from the point of view of the greater story. For the convenience (and sanity) of the GMs, spectators who want to watch events unfold, and the Story Team who have to make sense of it all, we're going to focus much more on capturing and encapsulating the important material. We want to make the key happenings and outcomes more accessible to everyone, and have a number of ideas for ways to make that happen.
- The first Winter Court was conducted with little oversight or involvement from the Story Team. This proved to be a problem, as some issues came up that required answers or insight from the Story Team, resulting in long delays in resolving what should have been simple issues. Subsequent Winter Court events tried to address this; the last Winter Court had a standing Story Team representative on the GM Team. We're going to continue this, and ensure the Story Team is firmly plugged-in to what's going on throughout Winter Court 4.
- People being people, sometimes enthusiasm, passions and personal biases get the better of both players and GMs. We want to ensure that everyone has a good time while flexing their role playing "muscles", but also have to ensure we maintain a safe and respectful play environment for all. We will be paying particular attention to any instances of players or GMs getting "carried away" (for lack of a better term) with their role playing or, more egregiously, allowing their behavior toward other players or GMs be less than courteous. Such instances will be dealt with both quickly and fairly, with an escalating series of actions including warnings or even outright bans enacted. That said, we're hopeful everyone is able to get into, and stay in, the spirit of the event, which is all about having fun.

Words Cut Like Steel

Let's talk about the *in-game* behavior of characters. Frankly, we believe that most, if not all players of L5R are fundamentally nice people; the realities of living in our modern society generally requires certain social niceties and particular standards of interpersonal respect, if we're to function properly

at all. The same is true for Rokugan—except those niceties and standards are very different than those of our world. Put quite simply, most Rokugani aren't very nice people. Their motivations and conduct are dictated by a very different set of social and cultural standards than ours. Being "honorable" is not the same as being "good" or "nice"; it is quite possible to a paragon of honor even while manipulating, shaming, slandering and otherwise undermining other samurai. Indeed, such nasty behavior is a hallmark of Rokugani society in general, and its courtly politics in particular.

We intend to put a particular emphasis on this aspect of Imperial politics in Winter Court 4. Previous Winter Court events have shown us that, as basically nice people, players are often reluctant to do the sorts of things that actually fascinate us about Rokugani politics. Players balk at things like humiliating or blackmailing other players. This is understandable; after all, who wants to "spoil" another player's fun by shaming his character to the point he has to commit seppuku just to cleanse his honor? The fact is, though, that this is what Rokugani politics is all about—the ruthless dominance of one's political opponents in order to achieve Imperial, clan or even personal objectives. Accordingly, we are going to be implementing a number of mechanisms to encourage players to be "more Rokugani" with their character. The event will, frankly, be more competitive than past events; you certainly can spend Winter Court 4 gossiping over tea, but not only will not be likely to accomplish the goals that have been given to you by your clan, you *will* be likely to attract the ire of your clan's delegation head (which is not a career-advancing move). We intend to give you the tools to make it possible to advance your clan's interests, so Scorpion players may get blackmail-worthy information, Crane players will receive hints regarding who is seeking what, Lion players may discover military weaknesses in other clans, and so on. It will be up to you, of course, to use these tools wisely. We will *certainly* be rewarding those who play their characters in accordance with their chosen clan's general ideals—so Yoritomo players, get ready to bluster; Dragon players, to be enigmatic; Phoenix players, to try to be the mediators and peacekeepers; and so on.



Timeline

The following is our planned, overall timeline for the event:

- On or about June 1, we'll be starting to recruit Assistant GMs;
- On or about August 1, we'll be starting to recruit players;
- On or about December 1, we'll be kicking off the event; and
- In February (exact date to be determined) the event will end.

So there you go. There'll be much more about Winter Court 4 coming in the near future. In the meantime, consider if you wish to participate, and if you wish to do so as an Assistant GM, or as a player, as we will be recruiting both types of participants through the summer. Also keep an eye out for the new *Sword and Fan* supplement to the RPG, coming out in June, as it will contain a wealth of information that you'll find useful in Winter Court (see Rob Hobart's write-up about it on page 3 of this Imperial Herald). And start honing your political skills, because with what we're planning for Winter Court 4, you're definitely going to need them!

A True Scorpion

By Robert Denton

Hinoko sat at the edge of the wooden table and watched her father eat. It had been twelve long hours since her last meal; her stomach ached and growled noisily, and her thin limbs shook of their own accord like wind-swept birches. She stared with glittering eyes of midnight jet through a parted curtain of raven hair. She dared show no expression, although open want flooded from her wide midnight eyes. The table was a cornucopia of foods, bright appealing colors contrasting against dark lacquered plates and bowls. A fleet of flat sushi, arrayed in rainbow hues, flanked steaming bowls of mushroom hot-pots, bright and blanched greens in warm dressings, fresh oysters in sleet vinegar, and small mounds of piping hot rice. A ceramic teakettle overlooked the spread, and the smell of tea mingled with the offerings on the varied plates. She did not reach for them. Hinoko sat obediently, chopsticks untouched, and mutely witnessed the gluttony of her father.

Bayushi Watoken plucked seaweed-wrapped delicacies from the array of plates with deft chopsticks. He chewed his food openly, the noise filling the dark room. His oppressive figure dominated the head of the long table, in a room where everything was arranged to make him the center of attention. There was no one else here; the dim lanterns tangled his shadow with that of his daughter and splayed them flat against the rice-paper wall. Hinoko said nothing to her father. A mere child should never speak first. That was the rule. Even at this age, many years before her inevitable *gempukku*, she had at least learned that much. She kept her face expressionless, her thin body quivering and aching in *seiza*. She wanted to shift her weight, but she dared not. He was watching. Not directly, it seemed... his eyes were half-lidded, casually scanning the table for the next target of his chopsticks, never lifting beyond the horizon of his plates. But she knew he would see her, as one notices a candle's flicker. Now and again, the endless loud chewing of her father's food-filled mouth paused in favor of a generous sip from his teacup. Even though his vision would be blocked in that instant, she risked no relieving movements.

Without a word, her father laid down his chopsticks. Her eyes twitched to them, their wet points glistening in the dim light, flecked with rice traces and spittle. He lifted his gaze to her and chewed. She kept her gaze averted as he silently judged her.

"Well?" he said at last, when he'd finally swallowed his under-chewed morsel. "Perhaps you are ready to try again now?"

She looked to the food at the table. Her stomach growled.

He grunted, but made no motion. He was staring at her, hands on his knees. His voice was hard and draconian, completely devoid of any love or affection. "Go ahead, then."

Her jet eyes flicked to the nearest sushi plate. The colors sang to her, brilliant blood reds and pale pinks, bright greens and yellows, all bedded on narrow spheres of white. Cautiously, keeping her body still, she lifted a slender hand from beneath the rim of the table. Her thin fingers clumsily brushed her chopsticks. She clutched them, working them into position. Every movement dragged beneath her father's eye. At last, she held them in place, and sure-gripped, guided them towards the nearest plate...

"Why are you holding them like that?" Irritation bled from Watoken's voice. "Is that how you were taught?"

Her eyes turned to her hand. The chopsticks nestled in her grip, her fingers closer to the narrower tips. A mere two inches protruded from her fingers.

"That is how a farmer holds his *hashi*," he remarked. His eyes narrowed. "Are you a mere farmer?"

Obediently, Hinoko worked the chopsticks until she held them almost completely in the back. They now looked like the long beak of a heron. Her fingers twitched uncomfortably.

He nodded. "Proceed."

Slowly, she resumed her reach. The chopsticks opened clumsily, guided by her hand, until a plump morsel of sushi sat in the maw of the heron. The tail of a shrimp curled from the morsel like a beckoning finger. She closed around it with difficulty, her fingers' distance from her chopsticks' tips affording little strength to grip the food. She lifted it slowly, inexpertly, and craned her neck to shorten the distance between the food and her mouth. Hungry anticipation parted her lips.

Her fingers fumbled. The food fell sloppily from the chopsticks, landing on the table soundlessly.

Her father slammed his hand on the table, causing her to flinch. She dropped her chopsticks into her lap, face burning red. She sat, heart racing, as her father stared at her with burning, disappointed eyes. They sat in oppressive silence.



He sneered. "You must not want to eat tonight." Lifting his chopsticks, he snatched the fallen sushi from the table and shovelled it into his mouth. The loud chewing resumed as he continued to pluck food from a gradually-depleting spread. Hinoko slowly withdrew her hand back into her lap, deflating in the wake of her failure. Her eyes became half-lidded, her face without expression.

"You are a shame to this family," her father said between bites and chewing. She didn't react. She just stared at the far wall. "You are a complete failure," he continued. "You will never be good enough. Nothing you ever do will be worthy of us. Even your Suzume mother would be ashamed of you, if she were alive to see this." He grabbed at more food as he talked. Mounds of rice and shrimp quivered in his mouth. "It is better that she died. She would be ashamed of such a disappointment for a daughter. What can you do right? I should cast you out of this house now, and save ourselves the embarrassment! You are no better than a farmer. You are no daughter of Bayushi! You will never be a true-"

All sound stopped. He froze, mouth agape and yawning like a beached fish. His eyes widened, suddenly white. A mound of food quivered in the back of his mouth. His chopsticks tumbled, clattering on the table as his hands darted to his throat. He gasped, but no breath came. His body jerked, as if trying to cough. His face broadened into gaping panic.

Hinoko turned her head to look at her father. She blinked at him, curiously.

Watoken flailed his arms desperately. Plates shattered on the floor. He slammed his hands on the table, again and again, the force of his blows leaving indentations on the hard wood. Then he clawed at his throat, body convulsing, his face growing pale, then purple. The bone-white of his eyes darkened and yellowed, then grew bloody pink. His back bent and he fell from his seat, writhing on the floor like a fish on a ship's deck. His eyes were wide and mindless, now, blood red where they should have been white. The flesh of his face was lavender-blue.

He met the eyes of his daughter. Reached towards her with a panicked hand. She did not move. She met his desperate gaze and simply watched.

At last, the convulsions ceased. His eyes hazed, then halted their flickering. His hand fell as his body tightened. He fell back, yawning at the ceiling, the firmly-wedged food mound protruding from his mouth like funeral incense. He was perfectly still. Not even a breath escaped his motionless lips.

Hinoko sat there, quietly, for a long time. Then, timidly, she took her chopsticks in-hand, reached for a piece of sushi, and seized it. She brought it to her mouth and quietly took a bite.

*Years Later,
1199, The Month of the Dog*

"This is the spot," Yamada said, surveying the ridge from horseback. It was difficult to guide the horses along such rocky terrain, but also necessary if they were to meet their quarry. From this vantage, he could see into the vast cleft of the valley, where the yellowed grasses of Shinpi Province gave way to rocky crags. He shielded his eyes against the early-evening sun. A chitinous mempo covered his mouth and chin. His lacquered armor was black. There was no Mon. No identification.

"We are early," he remarked to his partner, pleased. "We can set up camp before scouting." Glancing over his shoulder, his expression quickly turned sour. "Will you hurry up!? What are you doing!?"

Bayushi Hinoko urged her horse up the rocky hill. The beast was not accommodated to the terrain, and

resisted her gentle nudges. Her black armor was the same as Yamada's; it combined with her raven-hued hair and black eyes, made her pale face look porcelain and doll-like. Her mask rested, upside-down, on the back of her head. She seemed to ignore Yamada's words, focusing patiently on the horse.

Yamada frowned. "The sun will not wait for you. If you couldn't handle a horse, then you should not have come!" He looked back to the cleft of the valley as his partner struggled to meet him. "There will be no room for mistakes tomorrow," he whispered.

At last, she reached the top of the slope. This was but one of the hillsides in the Shinpi Province, which itself was a network of twisting valleys and hilly steppes. The landscape here consisted of steep hills, patch-worked with grass-clusters and shrubs, abruptly ending in tall cliffs overlooking the south and distant Kyuden Tonbo. Hinoko's horse ambled beside Yamada's and nibbled at grass. Hinoko kept her gaze averted, somber and quiet.

Yamada pointed to the great parting beneath him. "They will pass through there," he predicted. "They will come in the early morning. If it is a lone rider with a flag, then that will be one of ours." He looked at her pointedly. "A white flag means they stayed in the village. A red flag means something went awry."

She glanced at him, quickly up and then back down. Eye contact made her uncomfortable. He sighed inwardly. He despised weaklings. How she'd come this far was anyone's guess.

"Two riders is what we are looking for," he continued. "I am told you won the Bayushi court archer contest?" When she nodded, he went on. "You will have one chance to take out the lead. If you miss, they will be alerted to our presence." He dismounted and began unpacking. She came down much more slowly, suspending herself with great difficulty as the beast shifted its weight. His back to her, Yamada clenched his jaw to stave his irritation as she struggled to the ground. "Don't forget to take care of the horses," he instructed. "They will give us away."

She nodded, pulled her supplies off the back of her horse, then slapped it squarely in the hind. It let out a startled cry and kicked, it's hooves missing her head by mere inches and tossing her hair. She didn't flinch. It galloped down the hill, the other following, abandoning the two samurai.

"Idiot!" he barked in her face. "What were you thinking?! I meant for you to take them down the hill and *then* release them! What should happen if they fall? A corpse will definitely give us away!"

She stared at him, as if uncomprehending.

A surge of hot anger came over him, but he breathed it out and turned away. His peers had warned him about Hinoko. Her birth the result of an ill-conceived marriage to a Suzume woman, and as consequence Hinoko had inherited the Sparrow's simplicity. It was worse than just being slow. She wasn't... *right*. She almost never spoke, and she didn't seem to be especially good at anything. Implications were beyond her. Every order would be taken in the most literal sense. She seemed completely guileless, incapable of cunning or subtlety, always taking the direct approach to anything. It was clear that she would never be anything more than a foot soldier, a resource where the Scorpion already had too many. When she was assigned to aid him in this task, he knew he was being punished for some long-forgotten slight.

He sneered at her as she meekly unpacked her things. "You are no true Scorpion," he growled, making no effort to lower his voice.

The campfire's light was drowned in the sunset, impossible to discern against the burning horizon. Yamada scooped a helping of hot rice from the pot suspended over the fire. Hinoko ate slowly, holding her chopsticks irritatingly close to the tips. Yamada overlooked this, shovelling his rice and savoring the warmth in his chest and belly. The temperature was already dropping.

When he'd finished, there was still half a portion in his partner's bowl. "It will be a long night," he said.

She didn't reply, poking at the white rice mound.

"Hinoko."

She looked up at him. He met her eyes seriously.

"I am your *Sempai*, yes?"

After a moment, she nodded. Her half-lidded face never changed.

Yamada smirked. "I have undertaken two other missions just like this one. I was successful each time, but only because my partner obeyed my every command. This mission is a hundred-times more important than those last

ones. There is no room for failure.” He darkened. “What these riders have is meant for the Scorpion. It cannot fall into another Clan’s hands. They would use it against us.”

She nodded again, but there was no spark of urgency behind her eyes. Her chopsticks poked holes into her mound of rice.

“Listen,” Yamada said, “why don’t we speak openly? This is an important assignment, and yet you were assigned to it. Do you realize why?”

She paused.

He grinned knowingly. “It is a test, Hinoko-chan. Surely you realized that your gempukku was not actually the final test for your graduation? No, it is how you perform on *this* assignment that will decide the rest of your years of service within the Clan. They are looking to see if you set yourself apart somehow.” He met her eyes. “When we return, I am certain our lord, and your Sensei, will be asking me directly how you performed.”

Her eyes widened. At last, he was getting through. He let the implications fully sink in before continuing. “So you see, how this goes tomorrow is very important. Not just for the Clan, but also for you. Do you understand?”

After a long silence, she nodded. “Hai,” she said, her soft voice cracking from disuse.

Returning her nod, he rose, seizing a bucket of soil sitting just beside the fire. He dumped it, extinguishing the flames, exactly as the last ray of sunlight vanished behind the mountains.

The night was long. Yamada awoke several times, cocooned in his blankets, the frosty open night teeming around him. He did not get up until the urge to urinate informed him that it was half-an-hour from sunrise. He relieved himself, woke up Hinoko, and prepared. Within an hour, they were donned in their black armor, and Hinoko had strung her *yumi*. Together, they squatted on the top of the hill overlooking the cleft, and waited.

Time passed slowly. Neither said anything. There was not even the Spring-song of the cicada to fill the silence.

Then, two distant figures came into view. They were armored as samurai, on horseback, the Mon of the Dragon Clan flying proudly above them.

Yamada nodded. “There they are. As planned.” A pause. “It is too bad they did not listen to reason. Now they will die here.”

Hinoko nodded. She began to ready her bow, reaching for an arrow.

“Wait,” Yamada said. “Let them come closer, first. We must give them no chance to see us.”

She obeyed, waiting for them to advance. The riders were armored, their lacquered plates catching the sun. The one in front had no helm, but the *sashimono* flag was his. Details become clearer as they came closer; the one in lead appeared to be a herald, a young man with a traditional top-knot. The other was completely armored, even a mempo in-place. Their armor was scaled in lamellar plates; an arrow could pierce it, but only if fired with considerable skill and at closer range. They carried their *daisho* on both hips, katana on one side, wakizashi on the other. This is how Yamada knew they were Mirumoto. They rode with an air of urgency, and Yamada knew that once they made it to the mountain’s gateway, they would not stop.

When they were within 2 *chō* of distance, he nodded. Hinoko knelt and readied the bow, the top arm protruding high from her head. Yamada clenched his teeth, but the riders did not appear to take notice. They approached from the left, entering the stone cleft. Hinoko notched her arrow and with a deep breath brought the string to her cheek. They closed rapidly. Yamada found himself holding his breath as Hinoko did. Now they were only 1 *chō* of distance. *Now*, he thought. She didn’t fire. In seconds, they would be directly in front of her. They were so close now, he could see the glint of gold on the leader’s *tsuba*. *Fire!* his mind screamed. *Fire! Fire! Fire...*

She let go. The arrow launched in an eye-blink. It soared in a straight line into the ravine and struck the haunch of the front-most rider’s horse. The beast bucked at full speed, screeching inhumanly, hurling the rider from it’s back. The samurai hit the ground like a thrown doll, rolled to the side, and then lay still.

“Idiot!” Yamada screamed. “You’ve ruined us!”

A flash of panic showed in Hinoko’s eyes. Ignoring Yamada, she quickly drew another arrow and notched it. The second rider had dismounted and made his way to his fallen comrade. He knelt by the body. Yamada realized, with growing horror, that the fallen Dragon was still moving. He was gesturing weakly towards the retreating horse, which bucked violently, arrow protruding from its haunch. A hemp saddle-bag, secured to the horse’s saddle, bounced with every jump. Yamada realized that their intended prize would be in that bag. It

was only sheer luck that it wasn’t in the possession of the second samurai, or else he would have just ridden away.

Hinoko released a second arrow before Yamada could parse this realization. This one flew towards the samurai kneeling beside his comrade. Seemingly in slow motion, Yamada watched as the Mirumoto spun, drawing his swords, and splitting the arrow in one smooth motion. It fell in three pieces at his feet. He held his stance, the eyes of his helmet pointing directly at his attackers.

Yamada cursed. “Damn you!” Seeing no other option, he drew his sword and charged down the hill. The Mirumoto did not flee. He stood perfectly still, his green-and-gold armor glistening in the morning sunlight, one sword before him and the other pointing behind him, like the mouth and tail of a great serpent. Yamada saw Hinoko running by his side; she’d abandoned her bow and, as she ran, pulled her mask down over her face. The porcelain grimace of a demon replaced her features, a mane of straw spreading wildly from her pace.

“The horse!” was all he managed to say. She drew her sword. When they reached the bottom of the slope, he stopped, and she kept running. She ran directly towards the armed samurai, her feet carrying her swiftly over the rocky terrain. She raised her sword over her head, but the Mirumoto was swifter. He stepped into her reach, juttied out with the hilt of his sword, and struck her in the chin. She reeled just as the butt of his other sword slammed down on the back of her head. She hit the dirt and held still.



Yamada cursed again. *Useless...*

The Mirumoto returned to his prior stance. Yamada gripped his sword with both hands. As the two combatants stared at each-other, a wind passed between them. The rest of the world faded away. It did not exist in this moment. There was only the two of them. There was only the duel.

A voice came from beneath the Mirumoto’s mempo. “I would know the names of my ambushers.”

“I will never tell,” Yamada replied, “even though you will not live beyond this day.” His eyes narrowed as he took his stance. “You should have heeded the man in the last village. He was trying to save your life. Now it is too late for that.”

Yamada gave the Dragon no time for reply. He darted forward, sword swinging in confusing arcs that caught rays of morning light and hurled them into his opponent’s eyes. The Mirumoto yielded ground almost immediately, running backwards, crossing his blades. For several moments, the Scorpion swung his sword in numerous strikes, but each time the Mirumoto caught the blade in the X formed by his *daisho* and pushed them away. He stepped back with each of Yamada’s steps forward, deflecting every strike, until the Scorpion fooled him with a feint and caught him on the leg and arm. Were it not for the armor, they would have been severed. As it was, the Mirumoto stumbled back, recovering with significant difficulty.

Yamada held his sword out and smiled beneath his mask. “You see? You cannot win. I have studied *Niten*, Mirumoto-san. I know its weakness.”

“Is that so?” The Mirumoto resumed his stance. “Let us see about that.”

The Scorpion resumed his advance, but the Mirumoto broke off and began a horizontal sprint. Yamada followed, holding his sword to the side. The Dragon darted forward suddenly, and Yamada cursed as they crossed swords. He felt the bite of steel on his cheek, felt a jolt in his arms as his katana was hammered downward. He fell to one knee from the force, and realized as the Mirumoto passed him that the next strike would be at his back. With no time to spin, he thrust his sword over his head and instead deflected the blow. Successful, he then rolled forward and away, coming to his feet facing his opponent. Only now did he feel the stream of hot blood running down his cheek, and the place where the Mirumoto’s strike had pierced the armor on his leg.

The armored figure tilted it’s head. “You say that you have studied *Niten*. Perhaps you have. But every Mirumoto’s *Niten* is different, my friend. You have studied only one of them. It will be no use to you against me.”

Now it was the Dragon who was on the offensive, spinning towards him like a whirlwind of death. Seeking an advantage, Yamada leapt away and dashed towards the nearest slope. Higher ground would give him an edge. But the Mirumoto was undeterred. They fought their way up the hillside, Yamada’s situation worsening and growing more desperate. Glancing behind him, Yamada noticed that the hill ended in a steep cliff, just as the others had. Before a plan could formulate, the Dragon slashed his katana towards Yamada’s head. Forced to raise his blade and stop the blow, Yamada could do nothing about the wakizashi that went instantly to his side.

He gasped as the hot blade sliced into his flank, finding purchase between the plates of his armor. He staggered back as a wave of weakness suddenly overcame him. The Mirumoto advanced, shoving him roughly back. There was no more ground; Yamada felt himself fall over the edge of the cliff. Abandoning his sword in mid-fall, he reached out and managed to snag the edge of the cliff with one hand. He felt a painful yank in his shoulder, the extra weight of his armor nearly dislocating his arm from the socket.

He looked up. The Mirumoto looked down at him, victorious. “Tell me your name,” he said, “and I will grant you a more graceful death.”

Lifeblood pouring from his flank, his grip failing, Yamada cursed. “It was that damn woman’s fault,” he said. “We should have had you. We would have won... if it wasn’t for that foolish, ignorant-”

He stopped. The Mirumoto lowered his swords, choking. A katana’s bloody blade protruded from under his armpit. Hinoko stood behind him, having pushed the sword into his back with all of her strength. Yamada’s eyes widened. *Impossible...*

The Mirumoto turned his head. His legs began to quiver. His voice came, suddenly much weaker, but with a note of respect. “Very... clever. Why don’t... we try... again... in the... next... life?”

He fell, his body tumbling over the cliff and down.

Yamada watched it fall. From his vantage, he could follow it all the way to the bottom. Only now did he realize just how far this cliff-side was from the ground. A jagged, rocky patch loomed directly below him, far more than anyone could survive. He looked back up. Hinoko stood where his attacker had once stood, sword dripping. Her white mask was splashed with red. She said nothing.

He tried to pull himself up, but could not. He coughed, trying to speak. “Did you... did you finish... the other one?”

She nodded.

“The letter!” he gasped. “Did you... did you get it?”

She held up her off-hand. A tightly-bound scroll rested safely in her grip.

Yamada smiled in spite of his situation. “Good work! You... did it! I am... impressed. Now help me up. We’ll go back... to Kyuden Bayushi. I will tell our lord of how well you...”

His voice faded. He’d just noticed her eyes. From his position, he could see up into the sockets of her demon-mask. Her eyes, black as jet, looked down at him. Half-lidded and impassive, but with a slight glint of something behind them. Something more. Something he hadn’t seen before. Something he hadn’t expected.

At once, he knew. He met her cold eyes. She did not move. She met his gaze and simply watched.

“I was wrong,” he whispered. “You *are* a true Scorpion.”

His grip slipped. He fell. The world fell with him.

“I regret that I could not save him,” Hinoko said, her face lowered with respect, “but his wounds were simply too grievous.” The court murmured around her, but she paid it no mind. Reaching into her obi, she produced the scroll and offered it to the dais with both hands. “However, I managed to avenge him, and retrieve the message. I present it to you, Nitoshi-sama, that it might be of some use.”

Bayushi Nitoshi, champion of the Scorpion, stepped down the dais. Wordlessly, he accepted the offering. She bowed her head lower, kneeling on the floor before him. Whispers passed between open fans. Courtiers exchanged glances. She did not look at any of them. She waited, quiet and obedient, as her champion read the scroll.

At last, Nitoshi nodded. “You have done well,” he said. “This is invaluable to us. Had this reached the Dragon Champion, we would have lost significant face in the eyes of the other Clans.” He rolled up the scroll and tucked it into his obi. “You show some promise, Hinoko-san. I will remember your name.”

The Champion stepped away, leaving a court filled with murmured speculation in his wake. For a brief moment, no eyes were on Bayushi Hinoko. And so, with no one watching, she allowed herself the slightest of smiles.

2014 Kotei Season Update

By Dan Dineen

Dan Dineen, Major Events Organizer for AEG, gives us a behind-the-scenes view at the thinking that went into the 2014 Kotei season and some thoughts about major events for the game in general.

Greetings Samurai of Rokugan!

This article finds us at the halfway point of [the 2014 Kotei Season: Renewal](#), and the clans find themselves in a heated race for the available storyline choices. Accordingly, we'd like to take this opportunity to give you a behind the scenes look into how the Events and the Story Team worked to bring you the 2014 Kotei Season.

One of the key things we wanted to incorporate into the 2014 Kotei Season was the idea that every player matters. Making the cut and winning a Kotei would still be the most important way of supporting your chosen Clan, of course, but we wanted to reward players for simply attending a Kotei and supporting their Clan. This idea was at the forefront of the planning for the 2014 Kotei Season. After all, the defining characteristic of Legend of the Five Rings is how the players can impact the course of the game's storyline. We believe that continuing to provide the players with opportunities to influence the story, both as individuals and, collectively, as Clan loyalists, will ensure that the game lives on for a long time to come.

Working with Shawn Carman and the Story Team, we decided to have the players strive for something that would have both an immediate and lasting impact on the Empire, while also advancing the story in a meaningful way. After some brainstorming, we came to the conclusion that something epic should happen to Personalities chosen by the players; accordingly, having such Personalities ascend to "godhood" as a Minor Fortune, and be immortalized in the story for all time, became our focus. Shawn also believed we should create a memorial for the winners, which would tie into the future plans for the story. As a result, the Shrine of Three Dynasties was conceived. With much turmoil coming to the Empire in the future, we resolved that the Tenets of Bushido would be a guiding light, one upon which the Empire would rely for its very survival. Since there are seven Tenets of Bushido, but nine factions in the game, the remaining two "slots" would be the Guardian Spirits of the Shrine of Three Dynasties, whose knowledge and experience would be available not only to the current Dynasty, but those that may come in the future.

Now, the concept of elevating a Clan Personality to the status of Fortune is both exciting and enticing, but we didn't want the never-ending struggles *between* the Clans to be overlooked. Despite the troubles the Empire may face, each Clan—and the powerful samurai who represent them—has its own agenda. This dynamic is being represented by the players of each Clan being able to choose among different storyline effects with the Glory Points they've accumulated during the

Kotei season (the various Rewards can be found [here](#)). As a reminder, here are the various Glory Point awards:

- 1 Glory point to a Clan per person who attends a Kotei playing that Clan;
- 1 Glory point to a Clan per person from that Clan in the Top 8 of a Kotei;
- 2 Glory points to a Clan for a placing third or fourth at a Kotei;
- 3 Glory points to a Clan for placing second at a Kotei;
- 5 Glory points to a Clan for winning a Kotei; and
- 4 Glory points to a Clan for winning the Honor Contest at a Kotei.



At the time of writing, the Glory Point totals for each Clan is as follows:

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------|
| • Crane: 469 | • Crab: 157 |
| • Lion: 234 | • Mantis: 149 |
| • Scorpion: 232 | • Spider: 141 |
| • Unicorn: 229 | • Phoenix: 132 |
| • Dragon: 190 | |

You will immediately see some competitive "groupings" among the Clans. Of course, some Clans are always going to be stronger than others, but if we put aside the obvious outlier of

the Crane Clan, there are two, fairly close groupings. Lion, Scorpion and Unicorn are virtually neck and neck with one other in one group, while Crab, Mantis, Spider and Phoenix form another. Dragon sits in between the two groups. The Kotei season still has a long way to go, of course, and almost anything can happen. For example, a particular Clan's player base may attempt to recruit players to their cause, and gain points for their Clan that way. Moreover, the new expansion, *The Coming Storm*, will become legal for Kotei play before the end of the season and that could also impact the final points standings as the metagame changes.

Turning to the actual conduct of Kotei events, from a Floor Rules perspective, our goal was to bring structure and clarity to how events were run. Changing what had been relatively static Floor Rules to a more dynamic, "living" document was a major step in that direction. Instead of being updated only once per year, the Floor Rules will be revised and improved as changes become evident and desirable. It is important that players not only know the rules governing the conduct of events they attend, but that they also know that those rules will be adapted and improved in a clear and timely manner.

This Kotei Season has also seen a proactive approach to errata if problems arise with cards and game mechanics. Ivory Edition has seen many adjustments to the fundamental rules, after all; while this makes for an improved game, it also introduces the possibility of unforeseen issues. We've worked closely with Bryan Reese, the Lead Designer, in identifying problematic card mechanics and then helping to review possible solutions. This was demonstrated by the pre-Kotei season ban of Well-Defended Farm and Exotic Farmlands, and the recent errata to the Crane Stronghold and Sensei. It's important for the health of the game, for its casual and tournament play environments and, in particular, for the enjoyment of the players, that a proactive approach is used to identify and correct such issues. It's also important, of course, such changes are considered and enacted carefully and only after good due diligence; we believe that Bryan and his Design and Playtest Teams have done an excellent job of evaluating and, as appropriate, changing cards brought to their attention.

Overall, we are all quite happy with how the 2014 Kotei season has played out so far, and eagerly look forward to seeing how the players' efforts shape the game as we advance through Ivory Edition and close in on the game's twentieth anniversary.

Behind the Scenes - Playtesting the CCG

By Bryan Reese

Bryan Reese, Lead Designer for the Legend of the Five Rings Collectible Card Game, gives us a peek behind the curtain into the making of the game. This time, he gives us some insight into the complexities of playtesting.

Hello, Samurai of Rokugan! This is the beginning of a series of articles in which we want to give you a look behind the scenes of the game.

Today, let's talk about playtesting the game, using Ivory Edition as our example. Overall, Ivory has been off to a solid start with regards to balance. There have been some misses, however—namely the fixes we had to make to decks running powerful Ashigaru cards, and to the Crane Clan Stronghold and Sensei. We've certainly heard people complain that these problems should have been obvious and never should have made it past Design/Playtest in the first place. We see how one could come to this conclusion. Crane decks, and decks running Ashigaru cards that benefited from the now-banned cards Well-Defended Farm and Exotic Farmlands, were dominating the environment. How did this happen?

The reality is that the Ivory Edition you currently know and play, and those few problematic things that did get through, are very different from where we started when designing Ivory Edition. What you see today is, of course, the final product—a total of 372 cards (plus the previous expansions) that don't change on a weekly basis. This isn't the picture that the Playtest Teams see as they do their jobs, though. Every week, during the Design and Playtest stage, 30, 50, or even more cards are removed from the environment and replaced. Take a moment to think about that. Imagine if we banned 20, 30 or more cards one week, then added the same number of new ones. We then ban and replace another 20 the next week, and again the week after that, and the week after that, every single week. How could a player possibly know the environment even close to well enough to play the game effectively?

To give you an idea of the sheer scale of change to which this amounts, of the final, 372 cards in Ivory Edition—which

doesn't even count the "staple" cards that come back in every base set, such as Clan Holdings and Rings—only about 40 actually started in Ivory in their current form, and many of those 40 were actually removed from the Ivory environment, only to come back later. Imagine trying to compete in a Kotei season when 90% of the cards that started the season were banned and replaced by the end of the season! This is the challenge facing Design and Playtest—a difficult process, to say the least.

Even so, despite our best efforts, some problems slipped through. But let's look at this from a different perspective. How about the problematic things that were stopped and prevented? The fact is that most of the problems in any given set of cards, Ivory Edition or otherwise, you will never see as a player. Hundreds of problems in Ivory—and thousands in the greater history of the game—were identified and addressed before any player ever opened the first booster pack or starter. Playtest teams may not find *every* problem *every* time, but they find the vast majority of them before they can impact the game. Like many things in life, however, the few problems that do slip through get all the press, while the huge number that don't remain entirely invisible. So, Design and Playtest headed-off a myriad of potential problems, creating what has overwhelmingly been a balanced and fun environment.

That said, it's important to consider one other point--Playtest's goals are different from yours. You, the player, generally have one goal in mind. You want to make the best possible deck you can, taking advantage of every card and card interaction, so you can win the game. This is certainly one of the goals of Playtest, but only one. If the cards never changed and Playtest's only objective was to make sure no deck broke the mold, then they could certainly be reasonably expected to find that remaining, tiny number of problems that sometimes

do squeak through. But this isn't their only goal. Imagine it this way; you are a security guard at a hotel, and your one job is to stare at the one screen which shows the single image from one camera in the lobby. You would be expected to do that one job essentially flawlessly. Now, imagine that hotel is on the Las Vegas strip, and instead of needing to keep your eye on one screen at all times, you have to watch dozens of screens from as many casinos, and you need to keep your eye on all of them at all times, to make sure nothing gets past you. This is what Playtest and Design are asked to do. They have to address a slew of questions, such as, is the game balanced? Is the game fun? Are each clan's themes likewise balanced and fun? If the game isn't balanced or fun, why not, and what can be done to correct that? Even if power isn't strictly an issue, are there any cards or other aspects of the game that just aren't interesting or could be improved? And, on top of all this, how well is the story being conveyed...?

This should give you an idea of the questions Playtest and Design have to tackle, each and every week, to build a constantly changing environment that will end up being reasonably balanced and fun for all the players. And these questions are not just asked for play with Constructed decks, but then also again for Draft games—and the answers could be completely different. It's a sometimes frustrating, sometimes exhausting job, but always challenging job. It's also one we gladly take up!

I hope this has given you some insight into what goes on behind the curtain for Playtesters. So, if you think this is something you and your friends would be interested in, please feel free to [apply to join the Playtesters](#).

In the meantime, keep enjoying Ivory Edition!

The Beauty of Small Things

By C. Thomas Hand

C. Thomas Hand, freelance writer for the Legend of the Five Rings Role Playing Game, discusses the importance of small things—the details—in creating and running an RPG that will be fun for everyone involved.

None of what you are about to read is either completely new or entirely my idea. Rather, I’m making a presumptuous attempt to restate the collective experience of various players, Game Masters (GMs), and writers for the L5R Role Playing Game (RPG) and other games, with my own slant and viewpoint. I also want to emphasize that everything I write for the RPG—for any RPG—focuses on one, cardinal rule: Fun is the most important thing. If the game isn’t fun, people won’t want to play it. After all, why should they? There are far better ways to spend your time than wasting it on a game-play experience that drags you down.

Okay, with that preamble over, I’m going to write about the L5R RPG and the idea that the smallest details create the greatest of stories for a game. Feel free to apply this advice to any RPG; I am certain it will carry over quite nicely. The heart of the matter is in this example: after you see a movie or read a book, it is often easy to distinguish the difference between a great work and an “enjoyable product.” Usually, it is not flashy explosions, gratuitous violence or even in-your-face drama, but poignant interactions between characters that draws us in. A good RPG is like this. The small interplay between character, NPC, and story creates drama while the meta-plot is background, filler, and not even always necessary.

Theme

Let me break it down in a step-by-step fashion. We begin with Theme. When you’re setting up your game, you can choose to make characters, pick an adventure, and play and enjoy the experience. You could also spend a little extra effort and try to think of the experience as cooperatively writing a story. The players and GM want to play a certain type of game, be it a Shadowlands “Horrors of the Carpenter Wall” story or a High Intrigue “Dangers of the Court” game, and each of these has a chosen theme.

How do you happen upon a theme? I take a cue from another great AEG product: 7th Sea. This game (now sadly out of print) involves a system called “The Other 100 Points” that applies well to all RPGs. The process is simple. Give each player a pre-determined number of points that have nothing to do with creating their character. Give them a list of themes, such as Romance, Exploration, Tragedy, Battle, Courtly Intrigue, The Supernatural, and so on. Ask them to allocate their points among these themes to see what kind of game the individual player and the players as a group wish to be involved with. You can take an extra step here and ask each player to write a quick sentence about their top choice to help clarify what the player means. This will help to shape your entire campaign.

Creating and Using Player Characters

Now, proceed from the small detail of a chosen Theme or Themes to the exciting process of creating Player Characters (PCs). Along with granting your players points to spend on character mechanics, create a handout with some basic questions to be answered as well. This handout can work side-by-side with the Game of 20 Questions in the Legend of the Five Rings 4th Edition RPG Core Rulebook. In your handout, ask each player to write down a couple of personality quirks such as



“can’t stand the smell of peaches,” or “considers all Crane foppish, wasteful, and non-essential.” Encourage the player to give their PC biases, prejudices, likes and dislikes that might later be used in a scene to enhance the game.

Additionally, I ask each player to participate in a simple writing exercise. Each player fills out the following sentence in whatever manner they see fit: *[Character Name] is the type of person who _____*. For example: *Doji Azai is the type of person who sees eta in poverty as the logical state of being and has no emotional response to their plight*. You can also ask the player to write a few words about each Advantage and Disadvantage they decided to take. Perhaps “Tactician” become “Tactician: My character has a gift for seeing the connection between small events and has a talent for manipulating them to her whim.”

A last note on PC Creation—once each player has created their character, I find it useful to have him “connect” his character with at least one other character in a game. Each player selects an Emphasis, a Skill, an Advantage/Disadvantage, or some other notable aspect of their character and uses it to connect their chosen option with another player’s. For example: Ikoma Jun has Sworn Enemy and Doji Seiyami has True Love. The players decide that the Lion’s Sworn Enemy is currently married to the Crane’s True Love. Now, with this small tie, the players have a reason to discover each other’s Disadvantage, a common in-game reason to unite, and an epic but also very personal story begins to unfold as a result. If each player creates one small connection like this to one other player, you will have no end of ready-to-weave threads with which to enhance your plot.

This brings me to my final point regarding PCs, which actually goes beyond their creation. This is their role in the game’s narrative. Most of what I have discussed so far relates to the GM. However, never be afraid to hand over the reins, so to speak, in game. If a player has a great idea for a narrative, begins describing some awesome version of events, or even if they just have a great handle on how an NPC might act, let them take over for a short scene. Let the player insert their individual detail and see how refreshing and invigorating it can be to “let go” of your story and realize that you are creating a group narrative—essentially, a shared story-telling experience. Letting someone else take over will recharge your batteries, give the rest of the players a new perspective, and enhance game-play.

Non-Player Characters

The next aspect of game-play I’ll discuss concerns the Non-Player Characters (NPCs) and the larger game. When making NPCs, I find I have the bad habit of focusing on Clan, stereotypes of family/role, and their Advantages and Disadvantages. This creates static and flat characters that are easily interchangeable (read, *boring*). The way I spice things up is to use the above techniques on the NPCs as well. I pick a personality trait or quirk about the NPC and engage with it in play. Perhaps Doji Azai fiddles with the loose threads of his obi when angry, physically unraveling something as he mentally falls apart. No matter the chosen quirk, take note of whether the PCs like it and the person, and try to determine what “plays well” at the table. If you realize that the character is uninteresting, remove him and introduce someone else (or change them dramatically with “an incident”). Realize that every tiny piece of the game counts towards the overall fun of the experience, and that no matter how logical it is to have the Hatamoto of the Daimyo remain the same character, if he is boring, he has to go.

Tying It All Together

Try to continue thinking small. My own tendency is to write huge, sweeping meta-plots that rarely, if ever get to be seen in a fashion outside a generalized summary. When you have an awesome idea for a game, figure out its “meat” or “center” and write down what purpose or point it is meant to convey. You want to build your interaction in the game around this central idea, not the huge but probably vague sweep of an outlined screenplay. Aside from the bare bones focus, the rest is just fluff or window-dressing and can be thrown away or just used as broad background information for the players. If you can branch out from this idea and create other basic scenes and events, you will find that an entire story develops.

One word of caution, however; while it is interesting to add in a ton of extra detail, this can just as often bog down a role playing session in pointless narrative. Show, don’t tell. Show by making the entire scene focus on a single, defined purpose. An example: I want to create a scene in which anger rises in court and a PC is pushed to the breaking point, so that my NPC might be able to engineer a duel to the death. That’s all I need for the scene – find a way to make the character, in game, loose his cool, and try to outmaneuver the character (not the player) into accepting a duel. Often, you want to make this purpose obvious to the player after a while, as well. Sometimes they will help you develop the scene if they think it’s going the direction they wish to play.

By utilizing the above techniques you will find that much of your game begins to write itself. In fact, you will probably have too many ideas to fit into one game. At this point, you will have to go out of your way to pare it all down into the “meat” of what you hope to accomplish, picking out the choice bits and recognizing the rest for what it is: window dressing. Play off all the little details and create scenes, an outline, and experiences that you and the players will enjoy. These small “good actions” will never fail to drive the greatest of stories.

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