




*Legend of the
Five Rings*

THE BOOK OF VOID





THE BOOK OF VOID

WRITTEN BY: *Kevin Blake, Marie Brennan, Robert Denton, Chris Hand, Rob Hobart, Dave Laderoute, Maxime Lemaire, Seth Mason, Ryan Reese*

EDITED BY: *Robert Hobart*
ART DIRECTOR: *Robert Hobart*
COVER DESIGN: *Robert Denton*
COVER ART: *Aurelien Hubert*
LAYOUT: *Robert Denton*
ORIGINAL GRAPHIC DESIGN: *Edge Entertainment*

ARTISTS: *Aaron Acevedo, Steve Argyle, Randy Asplund-Faith, Stefano Baldo, Stu Barnes, Jason Behnke, Hannah Boving, Dennis Calero, Sergio Camarena, Luis Nuez de Castro Torres, Brent Chumley, Miguel Coimbra, Conceptopolis, Storm Cook, Michael Dixon, John Donahue, Steve Ellis, Jason Engle, Anthony Fancisco, Shen Fei, Viktor Fetsch, Felipe Gaona, Joachim Gmoser, Gong Studios, Hector Herrera, Jon Hodgson, David Horne, Aurelien Hubert, Jonathan Hunt, Lisa Hunt, Llyn Hunter, Imaginary Friends Studios, Veronica Jones, Jason Juta, Dave Kendall, Heather V Kreiter, Kez L, Brandon Leach, April Lee, Diego Llorens, Jorge Matar, Patrick McEvoy, Aaron Miller, Johnathan Moore, Jonathan Morrel, Rebekah Norris, William O'Connor, Glen Osterberger, Chris Ostrowski, Immar Palomera, Ben Peck, Joshua Pinkas, Mark Poole, Erich Schreiner, Chris Seaman, Adam Shumpert, Lee Smith, Danielle Storey, Nikolay Stoyanov, Alberto Tavira, Wenjuinn, Mario Wibisono*

PRODUCTION MANAGER: *David Lepore*
SENIOR BRAND MANAGER: *Todd Rowland*
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER: *John Zinser*

DESIGN TEAM: *Robert Hobart*
HEAD PLAYTESTER: *Brian Bates*

PLAYTESTERS: *Team 1 (Dave Smith, Patrick Chen, Aien Elmi, Jason Kang, Ki Chang Kim, Roger Liang, Arthur Nguyen); Team 4 (Becca Hobart, Kevin Blake, Todd Stites, Daniel Briscoe); Team 6 (Timar Long, Erykah Fasset, Chad Kirby, Mike Brodu, Maxime Lemaire, Ray Rupp); Team 7 (Jason Shafer, Nathan Shafer, Matt Strout, Liza Strout, Joe White, Terry Moore, Eric Newlin); Team 8 (Edward Reynolds, Breboullet Mathieu, David Whitney, Richard Whitney, Stuart Biggs, Robert Knight); Team 8b (Michael Hill, Shane Pheene, Chaedy Ritherdon, Tarl Cowly); Team 8c (Thomas Atwood, Ryan Castilla, Henry Joiner, Brandon Woodmen); Team 17 (Tom Lewis, Jamie Kipp, Gavin O'Hearn, Shawn MacLean, John Taylor); Team 18 (Dave Laderoute, Mike Clark, Chris Talarico, Chris Masdea, Lee Vollum, Richard Hewitt, Bill Hrenchuck); Team 19 (Charles Caswell, Vincent Stantion, Eddie Sweeden, Chuck Sweeden, Justin Cross, Fox Whitworth); Team 20 (Matt Tyler, Timothy Hill, Stephen Mumford, Matthew Linkswiler, Paul Casagrande, Robert Zapf); Team 21 (James Freeman-Harris, Sarah Koz, David Wright, James Mosingo); Team 22 (Scott Shepard, Dawn Dalton, Andrew Doud, Justin Davidson, Jon Huskey, Trista Lillis); Team 23 (James Wagner, Kevin Pason, Ryan Bataglia, Chris Foster, Jim Friedman, Jason Whiston, Phil Jenicek, Dan Sulin, Izzy Lombardi-Friedman); Team 24 (Tony Love, Cassandra Mullin, Brian Tieken, Kimberly Wajer-Scott, Phillip Scott, Nicholas Love, Jerry Fleenor, Patrick Williams) Jim Friedman, Izzy Friedman, Jay Becknell, Mandy Spice*

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The Book of Void



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INTRODUCTION



Lord Ichitaka was suspicious of the monk when he arrived unannounced at the doorstep of Shiro Koritome. Of course, the monk was well-received and afforded every possible courtesy. It would not do to insult a member of the Brotherhood, after all, and Courtesy was a virtue of Bushido. Even so, the presence of such a man made the daimyo uncomfortable. Monks were notoriously unpredictable, and Matsu Ichitaka no Koritome had no time for distractions. It would be best to simply give the monk whatever he sought and be rid of him as quickly as possible.

Matsu Mikiko knew these were her father's thoughts. Even though they were not close, Mikiko knew exactly how her father thought and acted. To say he was a shrewd man and a distant father was only scratching the surface. The fact was that Ichitaka only cared for power... and how to get more of it. Although she served him loyally, and had performed adequately in the dojo, her training had not advanced enough to take part in Ichitaka's land-grabbing schemes or his efforts to expand his courtly influence through feats of war. Since she had done little for his goals, he paid her little mind, and that suited her well enough. In truth, she had no desire to draw her father's attention. She did not see the point of his relentless ambition. In fact, as of late, she found she did not see the point in many things...

The monk was a wrinkled old man with thick snowy eyebrows and a fox's sly smile. He wore a plain burlap robe that looked cheaper than his alms bowl. He had introduced himself as "Master Bonsen," although what he was a master of had been omitted. The old man sat on a velvet cushion before the dais, eating a mound of rice and sipping tea from one of Lord Ichitaka's finest cups. A palace servant knelt beside him, diligently re-filling his cup. A meal was always the proper gift to offer a man of the cloth.

Lord Ichitaka watched from the dais, fan in hand, quiet and patient. Ichitaka's eldest son Taro sat to his right. Mikiko stood on the dais in her armor, for unlike her brother she was on duty. Everyone in the room – soldiers, advisors, and the daimyo's personal retainers – sat and watched patiently as the monk ate. A few whispers passed between onlookers in the otherwise silent chamber, but no one spoke aloud; that would be improper.

At last the monk set down his empty bowl, paused for a moment, and then bowed to the dais. "Arigato," he said. Despite his outward age, his voice sounded only middle-aged.

"It is nothing!" the daimyo said with a smile. "We are honored to have a follower of Shinsei among us."

Mikiko knew her father's words to be sincere... but not honest. The Lion had no interest in the Tao; the copy sitting in her family's dojo had never been opened, not even once since the founding of the castle. But the Brotherhood was influential, and to be well-regarded in the eyes of that organization had political benefits. Perhaps this "Master Bonsen" would speak well of Lord Ichitaka. Perhaps this would eventually benefit him.

The monk smiled back and nodded. "I am humbled by your generosity, Matsu-sama. It seems the Fortunes have smiled upon you since we last met."

The daimyo hesitated. More whispers traveled around the chamber. "I beg your forgiveness," he eventually said. "I do not recall having met your esteemed person."

The monk seemed unoffended. "You would likely not remember, in truth. It was so very long ago."

"I see." Lord Ichitaka waited a moment more, not wanting to seem rushed. "Well, Master Bonsen, I imagine you are on an important errand, being so far from the closest monastery. Perhaps I can assist you in some way?"

A polite way of asking what the man wanted. So he would go away, of course.

The monk nodded. "Thank you, my lord. Simply put, I have come to stay at this inn."

The daimyo paused again, confusion showing on his normally controlled face. Mikiko blinked. Surely she had not heard that correctly. Around the hall whispers became murmurs, glances were exchanged.





The monk continued, looking around him. "I admit, this inn is much grander than I first thought, seeing it only from the outside. How much for room and board for one person?"

Insult flashed in the daimyo's eyes. His face began to grow red, and his samurai cast each other nervous glances. "You dare to insult this court?" he growled. His anger was still under control, but the guards tensed, awaiting their lord's command.

Bonsen looked momentarily confused. "Have I made a mistake? Is this not the inn at Shiro Koritome?"

"This is the palace!" the daimyo thundered. The guards put their hands on their weapons. "You are in Shiro Koritome! Home of the twenty-second garrison of the Lion Clan, shrine of—"

"Curious," the monk murmured.

Lord Ichitaka halted. Bonsen was completely unfazed by his anger. All the Lion samurai shifted in their seats, uncertain what was unfolding before them. Even the daimyo was not sure what he was witnessing.

Finally he said, "What was that?"

"Honorable lord, who owned this palace before you?"

"My father," Ichitaka replied at once. "The general at the Battle by Starlight, where our troops were victorious over the treachery of the Daidoji!" Even as he recalled this, Ichitaka swelled with pride.

"And before him?" Bonsen asked.

"My grandmother, Matsu Kitohime. And her mother before her, Matsu Hanakohime. My family has owned this palace since its founding in the year 443!"

"Are they still here?" the monk asked.

Bewildered, the daimyo replied cautiously: "They watch us now from Yomi."

"I see," said the monk. "So then, this is a place where people stay for a short while and then move on." He smiled. "Did I hear you say this is not an inn?"

Lord Ichitaka stared, completely stunned. The entire court was silent.

"How dare you!" The voice was that of Mikiko's brother Taro, who leapt up from his seat at Lord Ichitaka's side. Outrage was plain on his face. "You mock my father in front of his court! I will not sit here and let you do this!" The young man clenched his hands into fists. "Father! Allow me to throw out this man at once!"

The court murmured. Lord Ichitaka frowned. It would not do for his ambitions to be associated with the disgrace of a monk. His advisors exchanged looks. The guards tensed again. Mikiko did not know how this would unfold, but she felt it did not bode well no matter the outcome.

Master Bonsen raised an eyebrow. "Oh? You would throw a man of the Tao out of your inn, would you?"

"This is not an inn!" Taro roared. "Say it again and I will break your old bones!"

Bonsen nodded, thoughtfully. "You know, Shinsei displeased Akodo One-Eye many a time. And yet he had something important to teach the Lion. What if I had something important to teach your family, young man? Would you still have no respect for an old monk like me?"

"I do not care. I would never follow you." The young Matsu's eyes narrowed. "Your way is not my way." At this invocation of Akodo's words, the gathered Lion samurai grew quiet and reverent.

"I see." Bonsen smiled. "Well, it seems you wish to argue this point and prove me wrong." He gestured. "Come here. Let us discuss it."

Taro shot a glance at his father, who nodded his approval. The young man leapt from the dais and stormed down to the monk, towering over his seat. The servant retreated hastily, vanishing into the crowd, but the monk did not flinch. "I will take great pleasure in this, old man."

Bonsen cupped his ear, leaning forward. "I am sorry, young man, but I do not hear so well out of this ear. Come here, to my other side."

The Lion frowned, then marched to Bonsen's opposite side. He leaned down. "I said that I'm going to enjoy this."

"Ah!" said Bonsen. "Then you do wish to fight! Very well. Help this old man to his feet."

The Lion took the monk by the hand and lifted him up. Now they stood, face-to-face, before all of the court's onlookers.

The monk smiled warmly. "It seems I am rather good at ordering around a man who would never follow me."

Taro looked confused for a moment, then his face opened with realization. Mikiko could not hold it in; she laughed from her place on the dais. The noise startled her father, who looked at her incredulously. Her brother's face turned red.

"You seem to amuse my daughter," the daimyo said. "Son, stand aside."

Taro spun around, protest in his eyes, but he did as he was told. Lord Ichitaka considered the monk with new eyes. "Where did you say we'd met before, Master Bonsen?"

"In your last life," Bonsen replied. A shocked gasp went through the hall. "You were the monk who saved me from bandits when I was just a child, the man who delivered me to the Brotherhood. Now that I have achieved kenshō all these years later, I have sought the reincarnation of the man who led me to my first step on the Path." His eyes flashed. "Recall me, Ibara-dono! My debt to you is repaid!"

The daimyo stared at him for a long time, face inscrutable. Then he nodded. "I recall," he whispered, "dear friend."

Matsu Ichitaka no Koritome shaved his head soon after that, retiring early to a life in the Brotherhood. And although Mikiko never did open her dojo's copy of the Tao, she decided she had to learn more about this Master Bonsen.



What Is In This Book?

Welcome to the *Book of Void*, the last of the five books in the Elemental series of supplements for the 4th Edition of the Legend of the Five Rings RPG! Like its predecessors, this book views the Empire through the prism of a specific Element – but in this case, that Element is the Void, the most mysterious and inexplicable aspect of Rokugan’s cosmology. Thus, while this book examines how the Void influences everything from combat to monastic traditions in the same manner as the previous Elemental books, it also has a unifying theme of mysteries and enigmas. The Void is itself a mystery and an enigma, a force which is both everything and nothing at all; it is only fitting for the Book of Void to explore every aspect of such things.

CHAPTER ONE: THE VOID OF WAR

This chapter deals with elements of war and combat are associated with Void: the unknowable currents that move the hearts and minds of general and soldier alike, the moments of *zanshin* – absolute clarity and lack of distracting thought – that separate a hero from a fallen foe. The chapter also includes a discussion of weapons so unusual that they simply defy conventional ideas of combat or usage, and an examination of weaponless combat associated with the peace and insight granted when one is well attuned to the Void. Finally, the chapter discusses mysteries associated with the path of war, from legendary ninja to appearances of the gods on battlefields.

CHAPTER TWO: THE VOID OF MAGIC

Rokugani magic is intimately connected to the Elements and their divergent nature. This chapter discusses the Ishi, those shugenja in Rokugan who have a special connection to the Element of Void, as well as extensively reviewing the game effects and challenges of the major Void spells. There is also a detailed discussion of the enigmatic nature of the Void itself, its connections to other races and other magical traditions, and the strangest and most enigmatic aspects of magic in Rokugan.

CHAPTER THREE: THE VOID OF PEACE

While all of Rokugan understands the importance of Void, the courts are not usually the setting in which such esoteric things are observed at length. However, a few groups and locations do evoke the spirit of the Void in a courtly way, and the path of meditation and enlightenment can be as important to a diplomat as to a warrior.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE VOID WITHIN

This chapter examines those few orders of the Brotherhood of Shinsei whose teachings and methods can be said to be oriented toward the Element of Void. It also discusses the common usages of the major Void Kiho, and examines in depth the practice of meditation and the greatest mystery of all: the elusive and indescribable condition known as Enlightenment.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE WORLD IS NOT THE WORLD

This chapter deals with a host of different aspects of Void in the lives of the Rokugani, whether those aspects are practical, supernatural, or metaphorical. Topics include places strongly attuned to the Void, natural and otherworldly beings associated with Void, nemuranai of Void, and the enigmatic stories of the supernatural known as Kwaidan.

CHAPTER SIX: NAZO MORI

Each book of the Elemental series has included a complete campaign setting for GMs to use in their L5R games. In this case, the setting is built around this book’s themes of mystery and enigma. The forest of Nazo Mori is suffused with legends and strange events, a place both alluring and terrifying, where anything can happen.

APPENDIX: NEW MECHANICS

As always, the Appendix contains a variety of new game mechanics for the L5R 4th Edition RPG, including new Paths and Schools, a new Monk Order, new spells (including Multi-Element spellcasting), new Kiho, and stats for new creatures.



The Symbolism of the Void

The concept of the Void is difficult to grasp and even more difficult to explain to one who does not already understand it. It is the Element that binds all others together, but it is not like any of them. It is present in everything but does not itself have presence. Some have said Void is simply the Element of existence itself, while other theorize it is an idea given form by the perception of the Celestial Realm. A few radical theorists have even speculated that the Void is simply the physical manifestation of the Nothing that pre-existed the universe.

Though the Element of Void is a complex, esoteric concept, it is not one limited to scholars or shugenja. Rokugani from all walks of life understand at least some basic information on what the Void is, or at least what they have been told it is. For samurai who are more literal-minded, who can only truly understand things they see and feel, the Void is often compared to Honor: a thing no one can truly explain, that is perceived differently by each person, that seems contradictory in nature... but which must be understood all the same. This answer is sufficient for many, though it often brings one no closer to truly understanding the Element.

Unless, of course, it does.

EMPTINESS

The most basic concept of the Element of the Void is a vast emptiness: the clearing away of all distraction, all physical form, and all things that are not the Void itself. This is not a dark, lonely emptiness but instead a serene stillness at the center of all things. All Elements are in harmony and in perfect balance, creating the feeling that they are not separate Elements at all. Like beautiful voices or instruments blending together, the Elements are present but not as themselves, instead united into something greater.

This aspect of the Void is easily the most relatable to normal people, since it is the mindset of zanshin – mind/no-mind – that all samurai seek, even if they do not realize it. In the heat of combat, it is the moment between breaths; when a shugenja reaches out to the spirits of the world, it is the moment of clarity and stillness before they answer. Everything not of the moment falls away and a pattern is illuminated... while still remaining just outside the understanding of the mortal mind. Yet in that moment, everything in the mortal's mind, spirit, and body comes together in perfect action and harmony... before the noisy, bright, and distracting physical world floods the senses once again.

PRESENCE

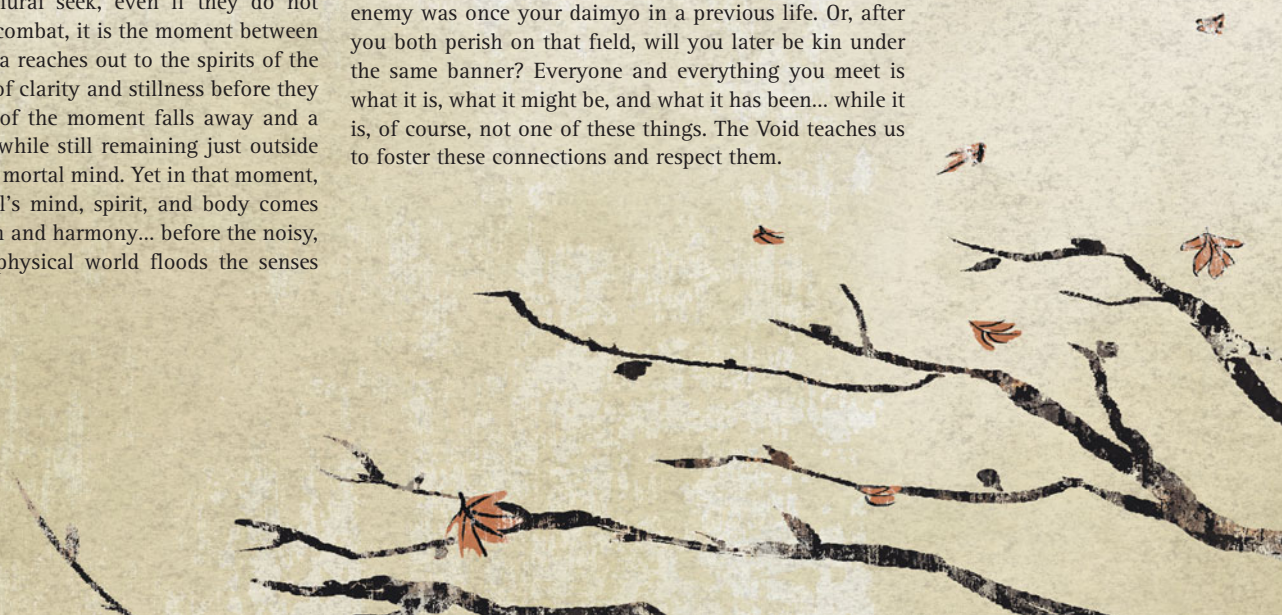
Though it is often thought of as an emptiness or lack of being, the Void is present in all natural things. Though humans and the creations of the Celestial Heavens have the strongest connection to the Element of Void, it is in the rocks, the animals, and even materials that have been worked out of their natural form (such as shaped wood). Void is the thing that gives an object its realness and purpose, and if an object is stripped of its Void (a nearly impossible and likely blasphemous act) it will be destroyed utterly. Such would make the very mountains crumble, the rivers evaporate into ash, and all order fall to chaos.

The presence and purpose of a thing is all part of the great pattern, and to defy this is one of the greatest affronts one can offer the Celestial Order. To change a thing's purpose is not merely to break a rock or boil water until it is gone; it is to alter the very substance of reality. The Void supplies the "why" of existence to something, in this way establishing its place in the Celestial Order. The very nature of a person or an object will fight against this perversion to the last, just one who is born to paint will always seek to lay their hands on a brush... or find some way to express their gift even when the spear is thrust into their hands instead.

CONNECTION

Like the unseen currents and depths of the rivers and seas, the Void does not just infuse all things, it connects them. On one level or another, all things across all Spirit Realms are connected in some way. A thing that dies does not shed its physical form and move to another Spirit Realm, for example. Instead, the physical body decays while the spirit moves on, but it is impossible to say that only one or the other was truly that thing. In the great cycle, the body might move into the dirt that one day nurtures a tree. The spirit takes its journey through the Realms and is reborn as a mortal... who might one day find shade under that tree.

This aspect of the Void is cherished by the peaceful and serene, since one of their most important ideals is that to harm anything is to harm the universe and thus yourself. The enemy met and cut down in battle might be formed from the dust that was once your flesh. Perhaps that enemy was once your daimyo in a previous life. Or, after you both perish on that field, will you later be kin under the same banner? Everyone and everything you meet is what it is, what it might be, and what it has been... while it is, of course, not one of these things. The Void teaches us to foster these connections and respect them.





FORMLESSNESS

The depths and reach of the Void mean the philosophy of this Element encompasses several strange and contradictory concepts. However, if one examines the nature of the Void, one realizes these things are not contradictory at all... but rather complementary. From seeming confusion and competition, harmony and order is achieved. This is possibly the least understood aspect of the Void – even those who believe they truly grasp this concept often do not recognize their own ignorance.

Scholars liken this aspect of the Element to Air, as the wind itself can seem empty and without weight, yet could blow over a mighty tree in a strong enough storm. The ability to take opposing concepts – rigidity and pliability, lightness and weight, chaos and order – and have them exist both harmoniously and simultaneously in the same space is difficult to comprehend. This is part of the way of the Void, however, and those who understand that these things are separate but at once all the same learn great things about themselves and the universe.

FORM

The inherent Void in all things does not just grant a thing its purpose, it teaches it form. Why does a fire flicker? How are we able to scatter beads of water in a bowl and yet they come back together as one? Many confuse this philosophy with the Element of Earth, and for good reason. An object or living thing's Elemental Earth is what gives it solid form, after all. But not all things are of their form due to that Elemental Earth.

This aspect of Void overlaps heavily with the matter of purpose described above, but it is more literal. Trees grow as they do due to their form, but why they grow that way is another matter entirely. Form is the most easily manipulated expression of Void, but only on a superficial level. For example, one could plant a garden and suspend a board above the things growing there. Though they could no longer grow upward due to the obstruction, they would still attempt to do so as soon as they were able. When looking at something's form in the Void, the wise often perceive both what is and what should have been.

CORRECTNESS

Taking all of these concepts into account, scholars often associate the Element of Void with the idea that the Void is the Element of truth and correctness. That which should

be is in harmony with the Void, while that which is corrupt, incorrect, or at odds with itself is fighting against both its own Void and the Void that suffuses the universe.

This is a dangerous truth to grasp, however, as many intelligent beings often have their own notions of what is and is not "correct."

When confronted with the reality of their misguided point of view, hubris can lead them to fight even harder against what they have learned. This can lead someone further and further away from harmony rather than closer to it. Such is one of the great dangers of both the philosophy and Element of the Void – perceiving it directly can drive the unprepared slowly (or rapidly) toward confusion or even madness.

Skills and the Void

A character's connection to the Void is expressed in a great many ways. Each individual Ring and Trait is at least partially connected to the Void. Mechanically, characters are able to spend Void Points to show fleeting moments of insight, harmony, and clarity that bring better results than usual. (From the character's perspective, these instants of perfection are brief and almost random). Similarly, characters' Raises are typically limited by their Void. This represents that characters with little inner harmony find it difficult to take advantage of momentary opportunities or to grasp a transitory inspiration.

There are times when a character's skills and abilities are directly tied to their Void Ring. Two skills use Void as their default "kept" stat, while others are well suited to situations where the GM might rule that substituting the character's Void Ring in place of the default Trait is appropriate. Because the Element of Void encompasses a connection that suffuses the universe, certain actions or tasks are more likely to draw on this elusive quality. When using a Skill in a way that is well served by inner peace or reaching out to the spirit and mind of another, a character's Void Ring may be more appropriate to use. This should not be confused with the sudden flash of harmony and inspiration gained from using a Void Point. Instead, this use of a Skill borders on the supernatural, tapping into something consciously in an otherworldly way and is not appropriate for most ordinary uses of such Skills.

HIGH SKILLS

Acting: The art of presenting oneself as another person has many different applications in the culture of Rokugan. Used honorably, the actor often represents not just a person, but some ideal or concept, as the various forms of theater and acting in the Empire favor layered performances. An actor portraying a fisherman, for example, may be in the play as a reminder of the simple and mundane on a stage full of influential and powerful figures. Correctly conveying this often relies on subtle cues and unspoken behavior as much as it does on more overt actions.

When attempting to convey meaning and true emotion in subtle ways, most Acting uses rely on Awareness in order for the actors to express themselves but also to understand the reactions of the audience. However, there are times when there can be no movement, no expression, no outward signs of storytelling. Instead, the actor must simply project with the spirit, standing



perfectly still and attempting to reach through the Void to express the infinite range of emotions in a simple, fixed posture and look. Rare is the artist who is able to achieve such a performance successfully, and rarer still is the audience that can truly appreciate it. When done correctly, all who are caught in the moment have been moved to the depths of their souls.

Artisan: Crafting an item for the observation and enjoyment of others is considered a noble pursuit on the Empire. Culture and appreciation of art are things that separate the samurai from lesser people, and even the most gruff Crab can be moved by a piece of art that speaks on a deeper level than just visual impact. Many artisans strive to reach their audience on that profound level, though few are able to do so successfully. Indeed, Rokugan's history is littered with the stories of promising artisans who had their careers cut short by too daring or too bold of a work along these lines.

Using the Artisan Skill with a Void Ring instead of Awareness can represent such an attempt. Strange, abstract, or subtle works that may be visually confusing or unremarkable at first glance, but draw the eye and stir the soul in a way that cannot be easily explained. Naturally, not all viewers will understand the worth of something – a low result on the Skill roll for such an attempt can represent a piece of work that is simply poor at delivering the intended effect, while a high result can produce something that consistently evokes emotion or appreciation in all viewers.

Divination: The art of divination comes in many forms, but all share a common theme: reading the signs and movements of the world and its events in order to discern some manner of pattern. The art often relies on Intelligence, as these signals move with an order that can be perceived and understood by those who have taken the time to study them. In some cases, though, the ways in which the universe and the Celestial Heavens express themselves are so esoteric or so subtle that one's connection to the Void is the only acceptable method of reading.

If a player wishes to use the Void Ring to make a Divination roll, the GM must agree that the signs and omens are so unusual that few (if any) scholars and sages have ever witnessed them. These would be situations where a normal use of the Divination Skill would be without merit, since there are no recorded incident of such signs.

Investigation: Much like Divination, the art of Investigation is about reading clues and signs. In this case, however, the eye is turned to the mundane instead of the divine. Out-of-place objects, inconsistent behavior, and other such clues can be easy to miss if one is not trained to know what to look for. However, Rokugan is not a place filled with only natural and mortal dangers – spirits, magic, and supernatural powers both malign and beneficent move around the Empire. The GM should allow for a Void roll with Investigation when the character has encountered something that mundane senses would not pick up. For example, even a skilled stalker may leave certain signs of his passage that a canny investigator can spot. An incorporeal spirit, however, leaves behind

VOID POINTS AND SKILL USE

In the narrative that an L5R game represents, the act of using a Void Point to augment a Skill Roll can be somewhat difficult to envision... especially since the vagaries of dice-rolling means it is possible for a Void-enhanced roll to turn out worse than normal or completely miss the TN. How can this result from a character calling on a presumed moment of harmony and insight?

The GM and players should remember that using a Void Point represents a flash of harmony and almost effortless ease with that skill, but does not necessarily represent the pinnacle of that character's ability. So while the results may not favor the character, the character should still have a sense of "rightness" about the action. For example, a painting made with a Void point may not be the greatest work the character has ever done, but that character will always have a fondness for that piece of art because there was great joy in its creation.



nothing... save, perhaps, a feeling of wrongness that an observer senses but cannot quite place a finger on. This approach should not be used for every supernatural incident, but rather when the character has some reason to recognize what has happened.

Meditation: As a Skill, Meditation is valued for its ability to center the mind and body, attaining a state of renewal and refreshment that is represented by regaining Void Points. In addition to that, the art of meditation is prized for its ability to calm a raging heart, restore a flagging spirit, or give a samurai a chance to contemplate difficult problems in silence. GMs and players alike should be encouraged to allow the Meditation Skill to influence other mechanics when such a calmed state could be of benefit. Countering penalties for a troubled mind (similar to spending a Void Point when penalized by the Lost Love Disadvantage), helping to resist the frustrations and stress of one's position, and other such things can all be potentially substituted for the Void Point gain from a successful Meditation roll. Obviously, this concept does not always suit the moment – sometimes one is so angered, imbalanced, troubled, or even magically influenced that there is no time to pause and meditate, or it would do no good even if the character could make the time.

Perform: Similar to the Acting skill, a performance can draw upon the connection in the Void between all living things. However, the moment in which this substitution occurs can be much different. Different uses of Perform may use different Traits, and there are times when the performer cannot use that Trait for various reasons. For example, a drummer might be too injured to strike rapidly or rhythmically, but still attempt to evoke a response from others by creating one beat every ten seconds, surrounding the audience with a slow heartbeat.



This use of the Skill still requires the audience to understand and have time to appreciate the performance. Perform Skill rolls that substitute the Void Ring for the original Trait represent a slow, subtle connection that feels otherworldly and has great emotional impact. Interference from outside can ruin such a performance, as can an inability to take enough time with the performance.

Spellcraft: Obviously, the art of entreating the kami is not an exact science. The Spellcraft Skill represents the character's raw knowledge of the known prayers, spirit behaviors, and other factors commonly observed in magical phenomena. By learning this Skill and improving it, the character understands more and more ways in which magic functions. This allows a skilled shugenja to ask special favors of the kami in limited ways or even to create new prayers that will have a repeated and predictable effect.

But in the matter of such supernatural things, sheer knowledge can only go so far. Sometimes the ephemeral connection of the Void is more appropriate when dealing with the elemental spirits. The GM may rule that particularly creative or unusual attempts to importune the kami may require a Spellcraft / Void roll instead of using the character's Intelligence. This represents a request

guided by intuition rather than specific knowledge. The shugenja is basically unsure exactly how to ask what he wants, and is attempting to ask the kami in a way that will not fail or backfire spectacularly.

Tea Ceremony: Similar to the Meditation Skill, the tea ceremony has a soothing effect on the soul. This can be treated in ways mentioned previously in the section for the Meditation Skill, but there are other social aspects that should not be ignored. The tea ceremony is a rite of honor as much as it is one of serenity, and those who conduct themselves well while leading such an event can gain some measure of respect from all in attendance.

While giving specific mechanical benefits from a well-done tea ceremony is not usually appropriate, the players and GM alike should understand that proper samurai will remember the event. Being a guest with a famous master of this ceremony is itself a great honor, and the attendees might find themselves indebted to the host (or the host's master). Additionally, it is an excellent way to have enemies – or those who might soon be enemies – come together in an act of peace and understanding. Not all samurai carry the same respect for the ritual, but many might pause when faced with making (or keeping) an enemy of one who has acted with grace and honor.





BUGEI SKILLS

Battle: Though Akodo himself did not have a high regard for the Tao of Shinsei, the Lion Kami's famous phrase that "all is war" agrees with the Little Teacher's insights in many ways. Though Shinsei would not say that all was war, he did show how war (like many things) formed a pattern and behavior that was mirrored elsewhere in the world. War can be in the courts, on the battlefield, in the words of two sparring poets, in the negotiations of two traders, and even in the back and forth of a proper courtship.

Characters intimately familiar with war can often apply the general principles of conflict to a wide variety of situations... if the parallels are noticeable. To those who have a keener insight into the world, these patterns are easier to discern. The GM can allow a Battle / Void Skill Roll when attempting to gain insight, knowledge, or find the proper behavior when dealing with any sort of conflict. This does not allow a character to use such a roll in place of proper Skill Rolls (such as using Battle when they should be using Courtier), but it should give a character some information or insight they would have otherwise missed. Perhaps a canny tactician in a court setting would be able to discern a rival's method or pattern of rhetorical attacks, giving him a general idea of when or how he might make his own political attack. He might even be able to figure out if two such diplomats are working in tandem but attempting to hide it.

Horsemanship: The bond between horse and rider is one that is revered among all proper samurai. Though the Unicorn Clan takes this far more seriously than other clans, true samurai understand their steed is a gift, a weapon, and a fellow soldier – all given to them by their lord. To disrespect such a thing is the mark of a worthless soul. Those who are truly in tune with their steed are capable of great feats while mounted. Some might even say it is as if the rider and horse share a form of mental communication.

In some rare cases, the rider will draw upon this bond in a more active way. Using the character's Void Ring in place of Agility might be appropriate when the rider is attempting to convey emotion or meaning to a familiar mount. These sorts of moments or commands go outside of the regular use of Horsemanship, and might include things such as attempting to still the horse's spirit in the face of supernatural threats, or even reaching out to the mount's spirit at a great distance. Instances like this should be rare and difficult, their use left to the GM's discretion.

Hunting: The art of hunting is prized as a skill that has both practical and social uses. Much as with warfare, many samurai see metaphors and correlations between hunting and other aspects of life. To be a renowned hunter is not just to be able to track and stalk prey, but to understand the world around oneself and to be in tune with the various aspects of nature. Hunting is an art of patience and cunning, two qualities that should be respected in an ally or enemy.

Truly remarkable hunters know there is far more to the wilderness than just what mundane might tell you. The unnamed flutter in your stomach, a nagging sensation in the back of your mind, or even some inexplicable sense of wrongness can all be clues that a lesser hunter might miss, an average one would dismiss, but a great one can understand. Thus, if a hunter is stalking supernatural prey or trying to follow some unusual connection (such as tracking down someone with whom they share a Kharmic Tie), the GM could allow the hunter to use a Hunting / Void roll rather than the usual Skill Roll.

Iaijutsu: Inner focus and serenity are traits that skilled duelists know are far more valuable than a quick arm or a steady gaze. One of the myriad reasons duels are used to settle disputes is because a duel highlights the purity and purpose within the souls of both samurai. Lesser samurai may win a duel out of sheer luck, but it is more likely their resolve will falter, their form will crumble, or they will simply be overcome with their shameful fear of death before the swords even come out.

When using the Iaijutsu Skill's Focus Emphasis, a duelist is centering himself and blocking out both the distractions of the mundane world and his own imperfections. This skill is useful in many other applications, but it is rarely an option for someone to simply stand still and focus in such a manner. However, a duel-like stare-down can happen in settings outside of an iaijutsu challenge, and GMs and players should feel free to use this mechanic to simulate the moment of tension before two rivals race to a doorway, move to the center of court to speak, or any similar confrontation.

MERCHANT SKILLS

Animal Handling: Similar to Horsemanship, the Animal Handling Skill represents a broader affinity for animals in general and a more informed capacity to understand their behavior. Normally governed by the Awareness Trait, this Skill is usually exercised by understanding the animal's reasons for acting as it does and finding efficient and effective ways to communicate with it. However, more than simple technique is used when attempting to soothe and control beasts. As mentioned above under Horsemanship, the Void Ring could be used when attempting this Skill in certain kinds of situations. An otherworldly connection between the character and the animal is drawn upon – this can be due to an emotional bond between the two, the supernatural status of the creature, or some unusual connection the character has with animals in general.

Craft: Creating something utilitarian is still considered a type of art in Rokugan. Indeed, the traditions of particular clans or families may even hold the skill of building something (sometimes considered peasant labor) more honorable than the highly praised arts of painting or poetry. Great crafters often have a 'signature' that defines their work beyond just their chop or imprint. A certain method of wrapping a sword, a particular pattern in worked cloth, a noticeable and unique arrangement of wood on a ship. Those who truly value their own craft are often said to leave a little bit of themselves in each such



effort. A GM or player could attempt to use the Craft Skill with the Void Ring when the character is trying to make something unique, something more artistic and spontaneous than their craft usually produces. This object is not necessarily giving up all function for the sake of form, but it will forever be seen as somewhat unusual, which can be praiseworthy if done correctly. In all cases, the craft will produce something that is representative of the crafter's personal biases, philosophies, and overall style. This roll depicts the character as being guided more by his inner spirit than the teachings of a sensei or school (though not eschewing them), and the results will show that.

LOW SKILLS

Intimidation: The art of intimidation rests in an unusual place in Rokugani society: it is a brutish act that should be shunned, but can also be seen as a natural consequence of living in a culture of warriors. Shows of strength and dominance are often tolerated and in some cases it is considered dishonorable to back away from them. And naturally, subtlety can be important. Like many other things in the Empire, just how overt the character is has a great impact on how others will view the act. If everyone knows it happened but no one can really say it was obvious, it becomes a matter of gossip... and gossip is, of course, only for the foolish.

Intimidating an adversary comes in many forms, but sometimes it is enough to simply unnerve them with a powerful spirit. While this is difficult, it is clear that some samurai simply dominate a room with the force of their personality or even their mere presence. No words need be spoken and no threats (obvious or implied) need be made; it is clear the samurai is simply a force not to be trifled with. Such rolls could be made with the character's Void Ring where Awareness or Willpower seems inappropriate.

Of course, this requires the target be aware enough to grasp such a thing and intelligent enough to care. A brave samurai can stare down a hunting cat that has yet to pounce, but has little hope of instilling fear into an oblivious charging beast... or a charging battle-mad bushi.

Stealth: A true master of stealth knows there is more to concealment than its physical aspects. Hiding one's colors, stepping quietly, and being perfectly still are all useful skills to learn, but not all things rely on mere mundane senses. Well-trained guards – especially those who are prized by powerful daimyo – sometimes seem to have a sixth sense when on full alert. Additionally, Rokugan is a place of magic and spirits, which means that supernatural means of detection are a consideration for any would-be infiltrator. Nearly all schools that teach the art of stealth embrace these facts on one level or another. If the GM believes the character has had the appropriate training or experience, it may be possible to avoid detection through supernatural or at least quasi-mystical means, using the Void Ring to make a Stealth roll when it would otherwise be impossible. This represents the character actually suppressing his inner Void on some level, dulling the spiritual connection he shares with the universe and making him harder to find through any means.

Void Advantages & Disadvantages

The essence of the Void is rarely expressed in a direct, literal manner. Characters who have Advantages and Disadvantages that are connected to Elemental Void often seem somewhat mysterious, otherworldly, and even unfathomable. Their lives have a touch of mysticism at the oddest times, and the characters themselves might find the unusual and supernatural comfortable and interesting rather than eerie or threatening.

Chosen by the Oracles: A mortal chosen for the attention of an Oracle is not always changed wildly by this experience. Sometimes, the Oracle in question simply observes the chosen person in order to maintain a connection with the mortal world. At other times, the Oracle's hand in that mortal's life is more evident and direct – and not always to the benefit of the character. Oracles see and think differently than normal humans, and often care little for the social conventions or concerns of the Empire. In all cases, the character's spirit and body are shifted in a subtle way – his inner Element that aligns with the Oracle is strengthened in ways that shugenja, spirits, and supernatural creatures will have little trouble noting.

Elemental Blessing: While many mortals have a slight imbalance in their Elements, this is only natural. Large and powerful warriors, for example, tend to have greater Earth and Water within them. However, when this balance is threatened due to a weakness in other Elements, problems can emerge. Those who only strengthen certain Elements in themselves usually do so at the cost of others. For characters with the Elemental Blessing, however, this cost is not so pronounced – their inner harmony more easily aligns with one Element or another.

Enlightened: Enlightenment is an ephemeral goal, one that some would say is not a goal to be sought or attained at all. Such questions are examined in detail in Chapter Four. What is agreed upon by those who are acknowledged as Enlightened is that it rarely the same journey, path, evolution, or goal that another followed. Enlightenment is understanding and harmony while acknowledging the ignorance and disharmony within and all around. Much like the Void itself, Enlightenment is full of contradictions that eventually blend together, creating no true contradiction at all. Those who have attained such a state are not recognized by all, but their inner Void is surely strengthened by it. Those who have the ability to see or gauge such things will immediately recognize the pure and harmonious connection the character has to the Void... and indeed the entire universe.

Friend of the Elements: Something within the character speaks to the spirits of a particular Element. Even if the character is not a shugenja, he may have a limited form of communication with kami of the friendly Element, owing to an unusually strong Void. Though this is not reflected mechanically with a higher Void Ring or other such benefits, the peace and purpose within the character resonates through



the universe even if he is not outwardly peaceful or wise. The kami sense a sort of kinship with the character, and some may even attempt to communicate. This communication may have to be indirect if the character has no way to understand them, of course, but the character will be aware on some level of what is happening.

Inari's Blessing: Just as mortal forms are nourished by food and water, the spirit and soul are sustained by the Void. Though the Advantage carries the Fortune's name, Inari may or may not have directly blessed the character with a stronger connection to the thing that feeds the spirit. In any case, though, the character will feel this ever-present connection to the Void in multiple ways. Often, the mechanical benefits of this express themselves by allowing the character to draw upon moments of endurance and power even under the worst circumstances.

When all others have succumbed to fatigue and despair from starvation, the character can draw upon reserves others cannot fathom.

Inner Gift: All forms of the Inner Gift Advantage draw upon the same source – the connection between all things in the Void. Mystic or not, the character is able to call upon the Void in an extremely subtle way, one he may not even be able to truly control. An unusual ability even compared to the feats of magic and elemental power available to shugenja and monks, the character's Inner Gift can be seen as a blessing or be mistaken as the influence of dark forces. Other characters trained specifically in the study of the Void or the various Spirit Realms may recognize the gift for what it truly is.

Ishiken-do: "Speaking" with the Void is poorly understood by those who cannot do so – even other shugenja. Ishiken are extremely rare, even among the Phoenix, and the experience of communing with the Void is difficult to put into words. Thus, comparisons are difficult to begin with... and nearly impossible with such limited numbers. It is clear the Void is not an Element like the others, and is far more dangerous to call upon even when trained. The history of Void-capable shugenja in Rokugan is filled with stories of madness, disappearance, and self-destruction for even the most balanced and careful minds. Other shugenja are likely to see the character as dangerous, like a barely caged animal, and non-shugenja are equally likely to either fear or deeply respect the ishiken (possibly both). Further discussion of the nature and challenges of the ishiken is found in Chapter Two.

Kharmic Tie: Scholars have attempted to define the nature of the spiritual connection represented by the Kharmic Tie Advantage. While the tie is not commonly seen, when it does occur it is often present in siblings, especially twins. However, it does not happen overwhelmingly in this category, so other theories have to be considered as well. Many scholars believe the tie is some manner of carryover from previous lives whose destinies became so entwined that even rebirth through Meido could not break it.

While the cause is not clear, the result is: two mortals are effectively "tethered" by the Void in an indefinable but unbreakable way. Both characters will feel the bond, though they may or may not have the knowledge or understanding to fully explain it. They will both know that they are tied

together on some level and will find each other's company comforting. While the mechanical bonus of the Advantage is described in the rulebook, there is also a more general implication that the characters will find it easy to work together in a variety of subtle ways. When they are building something, riding in tandem, practicing kata, or anything else that requires coordination, they will find that things simply feel easier and more natural.

Touch of the Spirit Realms: The hand of another Spirit Realm is on the character's soul, for good or ill. This is more than a mere affinity – rather, a real connection moves through the Void between that Realm and the character's spirit, influencing the character in both overt and subconscious ways. The tie can be seen by anyone who is able to draw upon that Spirit Realm or is able to perceive it in some way (such as a Kitsu-trained shugenja seeing a connection to Yomi), and it is difficult to disguise. Not only will the bond influence the character's demeanor from time to time, but other aspects of that realm – phenomena and denizens – might be drawn to the character.

Cursed by the Realm: The counterpoint to the Touch of the Spirit Realms, this bond is a negative connection, albeit functioning in the same way. The reason for the character's curse should be explored in full, since the disfavor of a Spirit Realm is no minor thing. Keep in mind that this does not necessarily involve the disfavor of a Fortune or other supernatural being, although such aspects could certainly be involved in the GM and player wish it. For example, a particular trickster spirit might plague a family line, or a soul might catch the angry attentions of an ancestor.

Elemental Imbalance: The line between a strengthened Element and an imbalanced one can often be very fine. In this case, the character's spirit attracts particular kami in a wild and unpredictable way. The shugenja might find it difficult to control the enthusiastic spirits, or might be reckless himself due to the imbalance, or some combination of both. The whispers of these kami will often be the first and strongest the character hears when calling upon the Elements, though this gives no benefit since the voices are chaotic and difficult to discern. In places of particular Elemental power, the character might find himself distracted from the sheer magnitude of the cacophony.

Lord Moon's Curse: Few mortals afflicted with this curse have lived long enough for scholars and shugenja to identify them correctly. As such, little is understood about it, other than that the death of Onnotangu at the hands of Mirumoto Hitomi and the later ascension of the Obsidian Moon in her place seemed to make no difference in the existence or frequency of the Curse. Some believe calling it "Lord Moon's" Curse is blasphemous, but even they are unwilling to truly argue that it is not somehow bound to the moon itself. The madness and rage that overtake the victim varies in all documented cases (as few as those are) – some become murderous killers, while others merely run wildly through the night. Just as important as what the character does under the Curse's influence is the reason why the character has been cursed. Though it is sometimes referred to as Lord Moon's Madness, it can also be called Lord Moon's Punishment, implying the unworthy soul may have earned such a state.





Momoku: Being able to harness one's inner Void is what separates man from the animals. Rokugani exceptionalism is not directly based on the concept of a soul's Void, but the two are closely related. Because of this, Momoku is not just a major mechanical disadvantage but potentially a source of great shame as well.

Like Lord Moon's Curse, this condition is very rare and thus difficult to truly understand or even detect. No matter how or why the character is afflicted, whispers, rumors, and eventually outright accusations will assault the character's reputation once their condition becomes known.

Touch of the Void: One of the most commonly understood dangers of touching the Void is that it is a raw and powerful force that few can even hope to cope with, much less control. The untrained mind and soul are simply not ready to deal with what they are touching. As noted in Chapter Two, ishiken spend years training to safely unleash the most basic Void magic, but the character's spirit has already naturally developed the ability to do so unconsciously. Unfortunately, because the channel to the Void is not attained through discipline and training, it can be almost impossible to manage. Whenever the character fails the Willpower roll, he will be overcome by the wholeness and infinite sensations of the Void. The character may be horrified, fascinated, or simply attempting (in vain) to reach out and control it.

Wrath of the Kami: Like many spiritual Disadvantages, the manner in which the character gained this particular problem is important to the implementation of it. Did the character truly earn the ire of a Fortune? Was the character's soul somehow scarred from a crime in a previous life? Did the character's parents bargain with supernatural entities, leaving their child to pay the price? The mechanical result may be the same, but the story of how the character was afflicted and how he deals with it will be unique in each case. Not only do magical effects seek out that character with unusual vigor, but the character himself will probably have a particular antipathy (or mild phobia) regarding that Element in both its mundane and supernatural aspects.

The Center Stance

The Center Stance is also known as the Stance of Void. Like the Element of Void, the Center Stance is both moving and unmoving, in one place and yet all around. Every true bushi school teaches this fundamental, basic technique, even if that family's dojo or clan's philosophy does not truly embrace the concepts inherent in the Center Stance.

Unsurprisingly, the Crane Clan – especially the Kakita family – places great emphasis on this stance. Few basic combat principles are as suited to the Kakita technique's philosophy as the Center Stance. In a duel or skirmish, a Crane swordsman is taught to wait patiently and fearlessly as a lesser opponent charges, flails, or otherwise moves about in needless expenditures of energy. And then, in a sudden, perfect strike – victory.

There is an indomitable spirit within a correctly held Center Stance, and a wise opponent often realizes his own imminent defeat simply by witnessing it. The Imperial dojo of the Seppun family shares much of the Crane's reasoning on the matter. The Seppun guards in particular find the moment of focus important when they believe an intruder is nearby or when they must represent their charges in a duel.

The Scorpion and Phoenix place similar emphasis on the Center Stance, but for different reasons. While a Crane may sit and wait to strike at the correct moment, a Scorpion bushi is taught to trick, befuddle, and frustrate an opponent. Sometimes, it is enough to simply do nothing in order to accomplish this goal – nothing physically aggressive, anyway. Quietly dodging and avoiding attacks while chiding enemies or making them doubt their own prowess is often more than enough to enrage foes to the point of making a critical mistake. The Phoenix, on the other hand, simply eschew needless violence. Though the Shiba often find themselves frustrated by the commands of the Isawa, this is not to say they are barely-leashed war dogs. All those trained by the Phoenix are taught to embrace the ideal of peace, but the Shiba know it is their place to disable enemies who will not relent. Though many of the clan's yojimbo favor the Defense and Full Defense stances, there are times where a single, devastating blow must be made in order to spare lives. The Shiba strike to incapacitate, not kill, making the focus and retaliation of the Center Stance ideal for many situations. Additionally, while the Scorpion and Phoenix do not have the strong dueling traditions of the Dragon and Crane clans, their bushi are well trained in the arts of iaijutsu for various reasons.

The Dragon themselves have a great many different observations about the proper use of the Center Stance, both in and out of a duel. As one might expect from a school as individualistic as the Mirumoto, they have as many philosophies about the Stance of Void as scholars have comments about the Void itself. One thing



is certain, though – the Mirumoto treat the Center Stance as merely one of a wide array of tools in combat. Dragon bushi dislike falling into repetition or predictable behavior, and few combatants are prepared for a sudden change to the Center Stance in the midst of a skirmish. As pragmatic as the Mirumoto are, they have been known to simply stand with perfect stillness and focus, opening themselves up to an easy strike... in order to make a more devastating hit in return.

Where the Mirumoto might practice such a tactic as an option, though, the Crab treat it as a basic aspect of combat. Crab warriors are taught to endure strikes rather than try to avoid them through speed or footwork. The Kaiu and Hida protect themselves with heavy armor and carry slow, brutal weapons, making them potentially easy prey for quicker foes. However, if speed was the only thing that won battles, the Crab would have been wiped out by the Shadowlands or the other clans long ago. While a Crab bushi will commonly adopt a more defensive stance (for numerous reasons), the Center Stance often plays to the strengths of the Hida and Kaiu philosophy of war – withstand your foe and then hit back harder than the opponent could possibly resist. Though the focus and patience for the Center Stance is not common among the Crab, those who learn to master such things are valuable assets.

The Lion Clan is composed of warriors who are often seen as fierce, brutal, and even savage. Those who have never encountered the Lion outside of stories or reputation expect to face howling, barely-controlled madmen swinging their weapons with unbridled fury. Such poorly informed soldiers are often surprised to find the Lion bushi are paragons of discipline and control... until the battle begins. Though the Lion do not widely embrace stillness in battle, the Center Stance is a tool to be used like any other. Before combat begins, Lion warriors preparing to meet a charge or launch one of their own often spend a moment mastering their fear, calling upon their ancestors, or otherwise centering themselves. Then, with a flash of steel and cries to the Heavens, the Lion unleash their strength.

The various schools of the Mantis and the Unicorn have little use for the Center Stance in practice. Neither clan is known for favoring stillness in combat, instead preferring to fight with passion, motion, and irresistible force. If there are any in either clan who can be said to use the Center Stance routinely, it is perhaps the famed archers of the Tsuruchi dojo. With a moment's concentration the world falls away and the archer and his bow become one. The nearly supernatural perception and speed of the Tsuruchi archers is drilled into them so they can fire with uncanny accuracy and no hesitation. However, given a chance to focus on their target – if only briefly – and center themselves, the Tsuruchi are capable of truly stunning feats of archery.

Yoritomo and Shinjo soldiers may sometimes adopt the Center Stance momentarily, as many of their attacks begin with a brief moment of stillness – the sailors preparing to leap from a kobune, the cavalry readying themselves for a charge. Mantis soldiers ready their weapons and their spirits, giving them a chance to prepare for the battle that begins as soon as their feet touch enemy decks or ground. Shinjo soothe their horses or loosen their girths before the advance.



But such usages are rare even in these families; in the Moto and Utaku families, the Center Stance is all but unknown.

The forces of the Shadowlands are never known to use the Center Stance, but their agents within Rokugan, the Spider Clan, sometimes hide a focused, detached mind beneath their violent exterior. While the “clan” has a great many warriors who hurl themselves wildly into battle, such soldiers often do not live long. The more feared Spider is the one who moves from one enemy to the next, striking down foes coldly, assessing the battle, and then dispatching another in turn. Such patient, calculating attacks are unnerving to witness, and are often just as effective as the wild berserk abandon of other Spider. However, the majority of Spider and Lost teachings (to the extent they exist) eschew such slow and deliberate attacks, and the Center Stance is not often used. Jigoku prefers more overt shows of strength.

Running Suspense and Mystery Adventures

The L5R 4th Edition Core rulebook includes a chapter called the Book of Void that offers a variety of useful advice on how to create, manage, and develop a fulfilling RPG story. It is only fitting, then, for this Book of Void to carry on the tradition and present further advice. This section is geared toward a more specific type of story, based around one of the central themes of the Void – mysteries, enigmas, and all the dark and strange things that hide behind the thin mask of reality. Here we discuss methods for building role-playing stories that heighten tension and create a palpable fear of the unknown. Mysteries and suspense are fitting themes in a world containing mystical kami, dangerous spirits, and divine Fortunes.





The techniques required to create good mysteries are in many ways very similar to those for effective suspense. With that in mind, here is a side-by-side comparison of what a GM needs for both – and what is unique to each.

VIEW FROM ABOVE

In suspense, it is useful to see all sides of what goes on to get a full picture of the dangers presented. The opposite is true for a mystery, where the participants need to be kept in the dark for as long as possible. To build a good mystery, the GM should offer tantalizing clues and tidbits, but avoid revealing things fully until the proper time. The PCs' efforts should produce only a few small details at a time, letting them slowly piece the clues together into a profound whole.

For suspense, however, the GM can actually let the PCs know about the dangers around them, giving them a “lofty” view of the situation. Place the PCs in positions of authority, let them find secret missives from the villains, or even give them ominous visions of the future or the past. One effective tactic is to show “previews” or “postscrips” which are witnessed by the players but not their characters, thereby ratcheting up the suspense by warning the players that their characters are caught in some sinister web of intrigue. For instance, after a long adventure spent recovering a stolen letter on behalf of the local magistrate, the magistrate congratulates the PCs and dismisses them – after which the GM describes how, once the

PCs are gone, the magistrate hands the letter over to the local Scorpion ambassador.

TIME IS NOT ON YOUR SIDE

Mysteries do not inherently require time constraints to be enjoyable. In fact, many of the best mystery stories advance at a fairly leisurely pace, and the GM should feel free to develop mystery scenarios that do not give up their answers until very late in the story. Suspense, on the other hand, needs a time constraint. Once the players are aware of the difficulties they must overcome, the GM should use time to both confine them and drive them forward. Each decision the PCs make should feel like they are rationing their time, each choice discarding other good choices. Each decision made is one not made and not retrievable. Mystery can occasionally benefit from a time-limit, however, when the GM wants to push the story along toward the big reveal.

As a side comment to this, it is worth noting that mystery scenarios are generally non-linear, with the PCs moving from one potential clue or area of investigation to another as their own thoughts and suspicions guide them. (For GMs designing a mystery scenario, it can be helpful to draw out a wire-diagram showing all the clues and how they connect together.) In a suspense scenario, however, the plot is usually quite linear, with one piece of information leading directly to the next.



THE STAKES OF THE GAME

In an RPG, the PCs are always the most important people within the story. They may not be the most powerful, the most authoritative, or the most skilled people in the game world, but they are the center of their story. The game is for the players, not the NPCs. For both mystery and suspense in particular, the GM needs the PCs to feel this sense of importance – otherwise, the scenario itself will no longer seem truly important. This does not mean the ending of the story needs to threaten to doom the world; it simply means they should be the prime movers of the storyline, the ones on whom the outcome depends, and while failure may not doom the Empire it should have serious consequences for their own personal world. The GM should also increase the PCs' significance to the story by tying in their backgrounds, histories, and Advantages/Disadvantages.

Mounting pressure is a quality that is especially important to suspense scenarios. To make the players feel the tension, the GM must stretch their characters thin, piling on obstacles, distractions, and unexpected threats. They suddenly must undertake vital side tasks, or must choose between continuing their main quest or something else equally dangerous and important. Suspense scenarios offer the strongest emotional rewards when the heroes have been through the wringer, survived chaos and seemingly certain death, and come out on top.

Both mysteries and suspense stories are good places to introduce the ultimate form of samurai drama and tragedy: the No-Win scenario. In a society like Rokugan, it is quite possible for such scenarios to have no “right” answer – the result will be terrible no matter what choice the characters make. It is up to the players to decide upon the lesser of two evils and face the consequences. For example, perhaps a mystery scenario leads the PCs to a corrupt daimyo who is brutalizing his people to pay for his own indulgences... but the daimyo is also a vital military commander and is preparing to defend the Empire against an impending gaijin raid. Do the PCs bring him to justice, or do they overlook his crimes for the sake of the “greater good”?

GOOD VILLAINS

It should go without saying that in any good oppositional story, the GM needs a strong villain. For mysteries, it is often advisable to keep the true villain hidden until the big “reveal” at the climax of the story, especially in a straight-up criminal investigation such as a murder mystery. Of course, the GM can drop hints about the villain's identity, motivations, and cause along the way. Each clue reveals something new about the nemesis the PCs will eventually meet. It may be noted that in a mystery the villain need not be a famous or prominent person, merely someone ruthless or sinister enough to carry out the dastardly deed(s) which are under investigation. It is even possible for a mystery scenario to ultimately reveal a villain who is seen as weak and contemptible, a moral failure who gave in to his worst impulses.

Suspense, by contrast, tends to reveal its villains early, delves into their character and motivations, and often shows the players why the villain does not consider himself to be the “bad guy.” In this sort of scenario the villain pretty much has to be someone powerful, a worthy and dangerous opponent – an NPC of considerable skill, or high Status, or great renown. The PCs should be frightened (or at least intimidated) by a suspense villain, and the villain's power becomes a testament to the skill and courage of the characters that defeat them. Political masterminds who can call on courtly influence and authority make especially good suspense villains, as do the leaders of covert groups like the Kolat or the Gozoku.

KNOW THE ENDGAME

In the earlier L5R 4th Edition supplement *The Book of Air*, we talked about the use of fluidity and free-form structure in RPG campaigns. It can be very enjoyable to give the players a large say in shaping the narrative, building stories without necessarily knowing how they will end. Suspense scenarios do offer some leeway in this way, but it is important for the GM to know how the big denouement will go down. In suspense stories, the GM can improvise much of the action along the way, piling on new problems and threats as needed... but there needs to be a goal in mind, a final scene that ties things up.

However, in mystery scenarios it is much harder to take an improvisational approach. The GM not only needs to know “whodunit” and have some idea of where the scenario will resolve, but also has to lay out trails of clues (and occasional tasty red herrings). This can be very difficult to do on the fly, especially since the “trail” is probably non-linear. At a minimum, the GM needs to know beforehand what is and is not important to the story. Again, drawing out a wire-frame diagram beforehand – even if it is very rough and simple – can be a vital tool for making sure the mystery fits together and comes to a satisfying conclusion.







THE VOID OF WAR

Yoritomo Jitsuko rolled as she avoided a blow from her adversary, ending in a crouched position a few feet away. Her armor and hair were covered in mud, and the storm which had broken out at the beginning of the battle was still lashing the ground with wind and water. She was breathing heavily, exhausted by the demanding fight... which made the apparent calm of her opponent all the more infuriating.

"You fight well," the Phoenix samurai said, his blade held in front of him in a defensive position. "My name is Shiba Gentaro. It will be an honor to defeat you."

"Yoritomo Jitsuko," she snarled between labored breaths. "And keep dreaming of victory if you wish. I have no plans to make this easy for you." She sheathed her own katana and drew a pair of kama from behind her back. She smiled as a slight frown briefly crossed her opponent's face.

"Will you not face me with the soul of your grandfather in your hands?" the Phoenix demanded.

"My grandfather was a drunkard and an imbecile - which, mind you, still places him above most Phoenix soldiers." She laughed and spun both blades in her hands, hiding her disappointment that he did not react to her gibe. Lightning ravened through the sky overhead, the white light flashing from her twin blades. "And these," she continued, crossing the blades before her, "these have been forged in a fire started by thunder, and carry the blessing of Osano-Wo. Do you remember what happened the first time Osano-Wo manifested his power in Phoenix lands?"

The Phoenix started to walk closer to her. "You," he said calmly, "are not Osano-Wo."

Jitsuko began circling around him, narrowing her eyes against the wind-blown rain. For all her bravado, she knew the Phoenix was a dangerous opponent. The complete absence of emotion on his face made it seem as though he was not even aware of the battle around them, but Jitsuko had just seen him cut seasoned Mantis soldiers apart with ease. She kept circling around him, backing away slowly, seeking irregular footing where the Phoenix would be off-balance.

His foot slid on the mud and for the briefest moment the tip of his sword dropped. Jitsuko leapt forward, both kama raised to strike him down.

Her blades never came down. It took her a moment to realize she had impaled herself on his sword. A coldness rushed through her body as her arms fell limply to her sides.

"As I said," he told her, in the same calm tone as before. "An honor."

A burst of energy rushed through her, from where she could not say. Jitsuko spat on his face and slashed one of her kama at his throat before he could react. Warm blood fountained across her arm, mingling with the pouring rain.

"Just shut up," she gasped as her vision turned dark and blurry.

They fell to the ground together, their blood mixing with the mud. Around them the battle continued, heedless of the two deaths that had just taken place.

It is commonly accepted in Rokugan that certain weapons and fighting styles are closely associated with one or another of the four Elements. Spears and archery are associated with Air, armor and wrestling are seen as fighting arts of Earth, and so forth. However, there is no specific weapon or type of fighting associated with the Void. The Void is an altogether different thing from the other Elements, an enigmatic force difficult even to understand, much less to harness.

Some might argue that the katana is the weapon of Void – certainly it is the only weapon which is known to contain some portion of Void within its physical form. Likewise, the dueling art of iaijutsu is associated with the Center Stance and hence with the Void. However, the art of swordsmanship is also associated with Fire, and iaijutsu dueling is seen as an art of Air as well as of Void. There is no weapon and no fighting form which can claim to be exclusively of the Void.

All this being said, there are some weapons in Rokugan which inspire deep awe and bewilderment, whether because of their mysterious spiritual nature or the ways they are employed. The Void is the Element of the strange and mysterious, and this section therefore explores some of the strangest and most esoteric tools of war used by the Rokugani over the years.

The Three Sacred Substances

At the dawn of creation, when Onnotangu devoured his children, their mother Amaterasu shed many tears, for she loved each one of them dearly. Her tears fell to Ningen-do, the mortal realm. Some of them solidified in the air, becoming crystal. Other became jade as they touched the ground. Later, when Hantei cut open Onnotangu's belly, the blood of Lord Moon similarly fell to the mortal world, becoming obsidian. On the rare occasions where it mixed with the tears of Lady Sun, the combination gave birth to the first human beings. This is why mortals are creatures of the Void, created from a divine spark containing all five Elements. But similarly, the three sacred substances – jade, crystal, and obsidian – each contain a perfect balance of the Elements, albeit expressed in different ways. This has led the samurai of Rokugan to harness these potent substances to create weapons, with varying degrees of successes.

JADE

Jade has always been the main weapon in Rokugan's eternal war against the Shadowlands, since it protects whoever wears it from the influence of the Taint and can destroy many creatures otherwise immune to mundane



weapons, such as the powerful oni. The Crab Clan began experimenting with creating jade weapons as soon as its properties were discovered (a breakthrough often attributed to Kuni himself). However, they were faced with two obstacles. First, jade itself was a brittle soft rock which was nowhere close to strong enough to be made into a weapon on its own, nor could it readily be blended into iron or steel. Second, after exposure to the Taint of the Shadowlands jade slowly corrupted, softening and eventually turning into a black sludge. This made even simple weapons such as jade-tipped arrows of limited usefulness, since they would crumble after being used against Shadowlands creatures or after a few days spent in the Shadowlands.

In response, the Crab resorted to “jade powder” – crushed jade mixed with an oil to make it stick to normal metal weapons. This allowed such weapons to inflict some harm on supernatural creatures without using up large amounts of the precious substance. Still, jade powder would wear off after a few blows, requiring it to be reapplied over and over in a sustained battle, so the Kuni and Kaiu continued to research ways to create actual jade weapons. They realized the only way to ensure their durability and protect them from degradation when close to the Taint was to use powerful enchantments. Only a few masters of the Kuni school have been able to achieve such magic over the generations, but their efforts have given rise to powerful artifacts. There are five jade katana in existence, all of them in the possession of various lords of the Crab Clan; each of these blades is as solid and resilient as the finest Kaiu steel, but can also protect their owners from the Taint indefinitely, never crumbling no matter how much of the influence of Jigoku surrounds them. These swords are all awakened nemuranai, brought to awareness by the combination of the powerful magic which created them and the intense use to which the Crab put them. However, like all magical weapons in Rokugan, their creation is an individualistic and uncertain process – hence their extremely limited number. Other jade weapons crafted by the Crab usually employ only a limited amount of the material, such as arrow-tips or tetsubo spikes, things which are less durable but easier to create and replace.

CRYSTAL

Crystal is a substance somewhat similar to jade, but with significant differences as well. It does not protect its bearer from the Taint, but at the same time it never crumbles under the Taint's assault. The few Kuni scholars who have studied the material in detail believe that because the original tears of Lady Sun solidified before actually touching the Realm of Mortals, crystal focuses its purity inward rather than outward to the world around it, explaining its different properties from jade despite a somewhat similar nature. Regardless, due to both these properties and its greater rarity, crystal was relegated to a secondary role in Rokugan's eternal struggle against the Shadowlands, albeit never fully ignored. There were a few Shadowlands creatures that were more easily harmed with crystal than with jade, for reasons unknown, and thus the Crab also attempted to turn crystal into weapons. However, much as with jade, crystal was

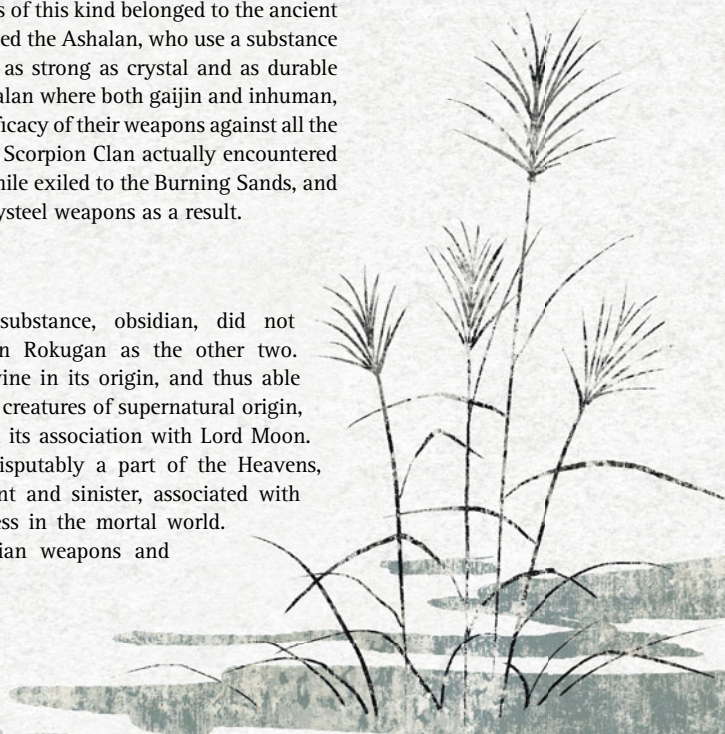


quite difficult to use in this way, and the Crab generally limited themselves to occasional arrow-tips and tetsubo spikes, similar to their early use of jade.

However, unknown to the Crab, other groups also experimented with crystal. Both the Unicorn Clan and the secret conspiracy known as the Kolat were long aware of the threat from the Lying Darkness, the primordial force which sought to unmake the world. The minions of the Darkness were immune to jade but oddly and almost absurdly vulnerable to the spiritual purity of crystal. The Unicorn found ways to use crystal against the Darkness, such as by carrying amulets made from the substance, and the Kolat experimented in the creation of crystal weapons, using powerful magic to create several crystal swords and other such weapons for the use of their most trusted agents. In the twelfth century, as the Darkness became known to Rokugan at large, all the clans became more interested in crystal, especially the Crab (who were suffering a jade shortage at the time) and the Scorpion (who sought vengeance against the Darkness for its attempts to control their clan). Research into crystal weapons and even crystal magic made significant gains, and the more adventurous scholars even discovered that other races such as the Naga and Nezumi also employed crystal weaponry. However, the most powerful weapons of this kind belonged to the ancient and enigmatic race called the Ashalan, who use a substance they named crysteel – as strong as crystal and as durable as steel. While the Ashalan were both gaijin and inhuman, none could deny the efficacy of their weapons against all the forces of darkness; the Scorpion Clan actually encountered the Ashalan directly while exiled to the Burning Sands, and acquired a very few crysteel weapons as a result.

OBSIDIAN

The third sacred substance, obsidian, did not fare nearly as well in Rokugan as the other two. Although similarly divine in its origin, and thus able to affect all manner of creatures of supernatural origin, obsidian suffered from its association with Lord Moon. Onnotangu, while indisputably a part of the Heavens, was nonetheless violent and sinister, associated with madness and selfishness in the mortal world. Although some obsidian weapons and





other items have been created, their owners have often exhibited violent and impulsive tendencies; wise samurai steer clear from such objects lest they succumb to dishonor. Desperate persons and groups, such as ronin or the Crab during times of dire emergency, have occasionally used obsidian weapons where no other options were available. Even so the temptation to use obsidian never completely disappears, for it is just as powerful as jade and crystal for the task of damaging supernatural foes – indeed, some evidence suggests it may be the most powerful of the three sacred substances in this role.

Unfortunately, there is another difference between obsidian and the other two sacred substances. Far from opposing the corruption of the Taint, obsidian welcomes it. Obsidian weapons and items can easily and quickly become Tainted, making them a further danger not only to their owners' sanity but to their very souls. This property has not escaped the notice of the forces of Jigoku, who craft their own obsidian weapons for their battles against the Empire. Not only are these Tainted obsidian weapons as strong as any steel ones, but they also convey the infection of the Taint with terrifying ease, making it all too easy for the Shadowlands to create new recruits. Even worse, corrupted artisans such as Asahina Yajinden have created some of their most dangerous artifacts using obsidian.

For all these reasons, carrying obsidian weapons is viewed with great suspicion within Rokugan... and carrying Tainted obsidian weapons is sufficient to warrant arrest and execution. The Crab in particular seek out such weapons in order to destroy them whenever possible.

Legendary Weapons

While most warriors in Rokugan are more than happy fighting their enemies with a simple sword or spear in their hands, others sometimes attempt to master strange and esoteric weapons – either out of a desire to distinguish themselves or because of an unusual tradition within their own family line. Legends surround the most famous of these warriors, legends which are seen as children's tales or histories of martial masters depending on who is asked. The stories which follow might be nothing more than legends, or they might contain the clues to secret fighting styles – it is up to the GM to decide which is which, as suits his campaign's style and tone.

GIANT WEAPONS

When gathered around a campfire sharing a bottle of sake, Crab warriors like to tell the story of Hida Kojiro, a warrior some say was one of Hida's great-grandchildren. A man of prodigious size and girth even for a Crab, Kojiro never went into battle without a truly gigantic tetsubo. The size of a man, it was made from the hardest stone of the Twilight Mountains and could crush an ogre's skull with a single blow. Kojiro eventually perished defeating an oni the size of a small castle, and after his death other samurai found they could not even lift his weapon. They had no choice but to leave it at the site of Kojiro's last battle.

Most other clans laugh at this story (when out of Crab earshot), seeing it as merely an example of Crab braggadocio and embellished tales of valor. The Phoenix though, do not laugh – for they share an eerily similar story. Shiba Mayumi, a samurai-ko from the dawn of the Empire, is reported to have wielded a naginata well over twelve feet long in battle, despite being of a small size herself. She died defending her lord's lands against a Lion incursion, keeping a whole unit of Matsu samurai at bay until reinforcements arrived. After her death, her fellow Shiba samurai found her weapon to be so heavy and unwieldy that they abandoned it, having to retreat before more Lion came.

Other less-known stories are sometimes heard in Rokugan about warriors wielding weapons of prodigious size, and opinions differ regarding these tales. Some believe they are simply fanciful exaggerations of slightly oversized weapons, while other think an awakened item or a samurai with some supernatural gift would be able to transcend human limitations and allow the use of weapons of truly prodigious size. Whatever the truth is, gigantic weapons can sometimes be found in the Empire; whether they are true relics of epic heroes, items crafted as a creative exercise, or forgeries to be sold to gullible samurai is anyone's guess.

PAPER WEAPONS

A very different kind of story is told about a samurai named Kakita Umeji. He was gifted with tremendous martial ability, but he was born in a time of relative peace and his parents sent him to study in the Kakita Artisan Academy, determined for him to win glory for the family line in the only way possible in peacetime. He dutifully obeyed, but always kept an interest in martial arts and continued to practice during his free time. It was while studying origami, however, that he achieved a breakthrough. Having noticed how easily one could cut oneself on the edge of a sheet of paper, Umeji crafted a pair of paper fans for himself. At first these were purely for the sake of exercising, and the other students of the Kakita Academy soon became used to the sight of Umeji practicing fan kata with his paper fans, just one more oddity in a place where every student was encouraged to find his own style.

However, one evening at a tea house Umeji and some of his classmates found themselves the target of threats and bullying from a ronin. The drunken wave-man clearly thought he could push around a group of pampered artists – but when he grabbed Umeji's kimono, the young Crane whipped out his paper fan and inflicted a painful cut on the ronin's forearm. Furious, the wave man tried to grab Umeji several more times, only to be defeated by the Crane's deft wielding of his twin paper fans, ending up completely humiliated and covered in painful bloody cuts.

Afterward, several of Umeji's fellow students asked him to teach them this strange fighting style. It became a sort of fad at the Academy for a year, seen as an elegant and artistic form of self-defense. However, rumors began circulating that Umeji had become so skilled he could now cut deeply with his fans, perhaps even kill with them. Less savory characters began seeking out his mentoring. Soon after this happened, Umeji disappeared. He left his swords



behind, indicating he had retired, and was never heard from again. Still, some believe his art was passed on to those he deemed worthy, and that artists who wish to learn how to wield paper weapons can still find a small monastery in the Spine of the World Mountains where the style is taught.

DEADLY CHI STRIKES

Many sinister legends surround the warriors of the Scorpion Clan, some carefully cultivated by them, others spontaneously arising from fear or strange circumstances. One such tale tells of a Scorpion warrior named Bayushi Okimoto who was reputed to have a sinister knowledge of human anatomy. Some say he learned it from his mother, supposedly of the Kuni family; others whisper Okimoto was trained in secret arts of ninjutsu. Still others believe Okimoto was a maho-tsukai who used dark magics to discover the secrets of the human body. Whatever the reason, Okimoto learned how to strike his opponents in the places where their spiritual energy – their chi – flowed and intersected within their bodies. Armed with such knowledge, Okimoto could supposedly cause samurai excruciating pain, disable their limbs, or even stun them, all by striking in a series of precise locations.

One tale describes Okimoto facing a Lion samurai on the battlefield. Supposedly, after inflicting three small cuts with the tip of his katana, Okimoto simply walked away as the Lion collapsed, coughing blood and dying within a matter of moments. Of course, the Scorpion Clan being what it is, no one knows the truth about Okimoto, who when not fighting in his clan's name maintained a low profile. However, strange deaths with no traces of poison are sometimes still attributed to what Okimoto's detractors called "chi poisoning." Considering how Okimoto's techniques could supposedly be used with any weapons or even empty-handed, it is difficult to confirm or deny whether they were real – and the Scorpion, as always, remain silent on the subject.

The Sacred Weapons

Although the smiths of the Kaiu, Kakita, and Tsi are the most famous in Rokugan, in truth every clan harbors at least some masters of the crafting arts. And while there is more to Rokugan than the art of war, war remains one of its defining features and each clan has its own unique signature weapons created by its own craftsmen. These are often collectively called "sacred weapons," and to be chosen to bear one is to be the recipient of the clan's absolute trust. These weapons are all considered to stand at the pinnacle of the crafting arts, and for those knowledgeable enough to identify them they are a clear sign that the bearer is not to be trifled with. It is extremely rare to find these weapons in the hands of someone who is not a member of the appropriate clan – they are, after all, unique assets which the clans rely on for their own duties and are loathe to share with others. One would have to be so greatly respected as to be almost considered a member of the clan in order to receive such a tremendous gift. Needless to say, thievery or misappropriation of a sacred weapon is an excellent way to acquire the bitter enmity of an entire Great Clan.

KAIU BLADE

More than almost any other Sacred Weapon (save perhaps the Kakita blade), the Kaiu Blade and those who wield it represent the epitome of what it means to be a Crab. The blades are crafted in the Great Forge of the Kaiu, using a carefully guarded technique involving a complex heating process which uses an extremely rare wood – called iron wood for its solidity. The result is a blade which is virtually indestructible and which need never be sharpened again. While they are appreciated by any warrior, the Kaiu blades are particularly treasured by the Crab in their struggle against the Shadowlands, where they face creatures who can snap steel blades and resist the strongest of blows. So great is the Crab reverence for these weapons that their stories say no one has ever allowed themselves to be separated from their Kaiu Blade except for one samurai who met the Emperor in person – and even then, he only agreed to be separated from his blade after the Emerald Champion promised to stand guard over it personally.

Beyond their almost perfect craftsmanship, the Kaiu Blades can also be identified by the color of their steel, which appears slightly darker to the eye than normal polished steel. Famously, these weapons are tested against helmets forged by the Kaiu themselves – the only material strong enough for such a purpose.

KAKITA BLADE

At least as famous as the Kaiu Blades if not more so, the Kakita Blades are one of the reasons why Crane duelists are so feared in the Emerald Empire. Forged with steel obtained from an exceptionally pure iron deposit found in Crane lands, the Kakita Blades are both lighter and more flexible than the average katana, allowing them to bend in situations where other blades would break. In the hands of a skilled swordsman, the speed and flexibility of the Kakita Blades can inflict deadly blows from unexpected angles, with a simple flick of the wrist allowing the sword to reach its target. Moreover, the blade's edge is of astonishing





sharpness, with many tales of a piece of silk floating through the air being severed merely by falling upon a bared Kakita Blade.

The forging of these blades is the sole purview of the Ashidaka vassal family of the Kakita, who dedicate their lives to the art of swordsmithing. They are tested on a boulder next to the family home, where supposedly the very first Kakita Blade was tested and emitted a sound so pure it echoed in the Heavens. This sound is the true way to recognize a real Kakita Blade, and a real master of the sword can recognize one just by hearing it being drawn.

TWIN SISTER BLADES

Since the dawn of the Empire, the Dragon have distinguished themselves in many ways, one of the most famous being their controversial Niten two-swords fighting style, employing the katana alongside the shorter wakizashi blade. The Agasha and Mirumoto master smiths of the Dragon Clan took note of the style and decided to create daisho sets which would be balanced to make the fighting style easier to employ. The forging begins with the master selecting two nearly identical sources of iron ore, testing them with a hammer and by how they react when exposed to fire. Smiths who are also shugenja (not unknown among the Agasha, and downright common in the Tamori after that family developed) sometimes will commune with the spirits of iron to confirm their kinship. Once the metal is chosen, the smith will forge the steel and then the blades, always going back and forth between the two during each step of the process until both are completely finished – including the tsuba guard and the wrapping of the hilt. This process requires an extremely intense focus, and most crafters

will adopt an ascetic life during the forging of a set of Twin Sister Blades, often refusing to even speak a word to others lest the distraction break the spiritual connection between the two blades. The final result is a set of blades so similar in feel and weight that

the only perceptible difference between them is their length, and a Mirumoto-trained warrior wields them with an elegant ease that no other blades allow. While the blades do not look outwardly different from other Mirumoto swords, an attentive observer can notice how every tiny detail is matched on each one. The Dragon try to never let the Twin Sister Blades be kept separate on any occasion lest the spiritual link between them be broken.

AKODO BLADES

The Akodo are a family dedicated to war in a clan dedicated to war, so it is no surprise that the family has master smiths of its own. What may come as a surprise, however, is that while they are skilled, they are rarely regarded with the same reverence as the Kaiu or the Kakita – which seems odd considering the place of the Lion in the

Empire. However, the reason for this is simple: tradition. When it comes to forging swords, as in many other areas, the Lion rarely stray from past ways or attempt to innovate. The Akodo Blades, the most valued possessions of the Lion, are actually said to have been inspired by the sword wielded by the Kami Akodo himself; to change anything in how they are made would be tantamount to blasphemy. Only the most honorable individuals are allowed to forge an Akodo Blade, for it is believed the purity of the smith's soul will infuse the sword. The forging process is not notably different from the way any other katana is made, but it does involve the finest facilities and resources the clan can access, as well as numerous prayers to the ancestors of the family. Once the blade is finished, instead of a maker's mark the smith will simply engrave the mon of the Akodo family on it, forgoing personal pride for the unity which the Akodo prize so much. As such, an Akodo blade will often look plain and old-fashioned to samurai of other clans, but is nonetheless of superb quality and craftsmanship, a truth visible to the savvy observer.

STORM KAMA

While the Mantis Clan does have a forging tradition, few of their swords are of high enough quality to attract the eye of other clans. This is because the Mantis do not focus their resources on swords – which are all too easy to lose in a battle at sea – but rather on the somewhat dubious art of forging kama, turning the small peasant implements into awesome weapons of war. The most treasured of these are the so-called Storm Kama, which are revered in the Mantis Clan the same way sacred swords are viewed by the other clans. A Mantis smith wanting to forge Storm Kama will first need to locate a fire lit by a lightning strike, not an altogether uncommon occurrence in many Mantis islands (and almost common in the City of Lightning). He will then bring the fire back to the smithy and stoke it until it reaches extremely high temperatures. After that the real forging process begins, accompanied by prayers and chants to Osano-Wo – typically performed by an



assisting shugenja or a monk, although some smiths utter the prayer themselves despite the added effort and fatigue. When the work is complete the smith will douse the fire in water, for to use it on more than one set of kama is seen as abusing the gifts of Osano-Wo. The result is a pair of kama of particularly large size whose steel shines with a bluish tinge. Despite their large size, they are expertly balanced, and most Mantis samurai would far rather wield Storm Kama in battle rather than a katana.

INQUISITOR'S STRIKE

A peaceful clan in a land of warriors, the Phoenix have rarely attracted much attention for their skills in forging weapons, preferring to focus on developing the armors of the Shiba and the magical prowess of the Isawa. Their dedication to peace, however, does not extend to the forces of Jigoku, and to equip their legendary Inquisitors the Phoenix have developed a unique forging process which involves fusing jade powder into the steel via prayers to the kami of the Earth. The result of this process is the sword sometimes called the Inquisitor's Strike. These blades are wakizashi of refined craftsmanship, sometimes showing a green tinge under bright light as a sign of their true nature. Although the Inquisitor's Strike cannot protect its owner from the Taint, it will affect Shadowlands creatures as if it were made entirely of jade. Furthermore, because the jade within the blade is fused into the steel and shielded by it, the blade will only very slowly corrupt if it is exposed to the Taint. This makes it an ideal weapon for the Inquisitors, who usually pursue corruption within the borders of Rokugan rather than venturing into the Shadowlands.

The existence of the Inquisitors' Strikes has sometimes been a point of contention between the Crab and the Phoenix, as the former believe the weapons represent a great waste of jade which could be better used on the front lines against the Shadowlands. Indeed, some have suggested that the Phoenix restrict themselves to forging only wakizashi in order to avoid further angering the Crab. The Phoenix themselves simply point out that the Strikes are usually carried by shugenja and magistrates who rarely carry a katana in the first place.

SHOSURO BLADE

As befit the Clan of Secrets, the Shosuro Blade has no reputation whatsoever in other clans, who do not even know such weapons exist. If they did, there would be an immense backlash against the Scorpion, for the Shosuro Blade is not only a dishonorable tool but one that makes a mockery of the true katana. Created by an ingenious duelist of the Shosuro family, the Blade appears to be a regular katana of fine quality. However, the tsuba has five indentations hidden in its engraved designs; each indentation is sealed with wax, and each holds a small

dose of poison – sometimes the same poison, sometimes different types as needed. (Thus, each Shosuro Blade can hold up to five doses of poison before it must be replenished by a Shosuro poison master.) Silk threads are attached to the wax seals, allowing the wielder of the blade to tug open the seals (and thus coat the blade with poison) covertly, usually in the act of drawing the sword.

The sinister design of the Shosuro Blade allows Scorpion samurai, and duelists in particular, to approach a foe with a seemingly normal weapon and then deliver a poisoned blow without any apparent source. After the deadly strike has been delivered, the samurai can continue to use the blade with none the wiser; the blade is of fine quality, after all, with good resilient steel and a razor edge that makes it the equal of any other quality katana.

MOTO SCIMITAR

During their exploration of the lands beyond Rokugan, the Unicorn encountered a great variety of weapons and adopted some for their own use. Many foreign cultures, including the Ujik-Hai who were incorporated into the clan, used curved swords to great effect, particularly from horseback. Since the clan's own swords were similar in some respects, many of the Ujik-Hai (later known as the Moto family) retained their traditional weapons, which they called scimitars. However, once the clan returned to Rokugan, it became apparent the weapons were still of inferior quality to modern katana, which had benefited from centuries of refinement in the art of weaponsmithing. Most Unicorn abandoned the scimitar in favor of the katana (which was also more socially acceptable), but a minority persisted in using the gaijin weapon, particularly in the Moto family. This tendency was further enhanced when the remainder of the desert-dwelling Moto returned to the Empire in the early twelfth century and their Khan was named as the new ruler of the clan.





The Mind, the Void, & War: The Moment of Clarity

Thus I have heard:

While in the lands of the Phoenix, Shinsei entered a small temple, placed his alms bowl on the floor, and sat in the manner of the lotus. There he meditated. Shiba saw him there and sat beside him.

Shiba asked, "Little Teacher, what are you doing?"

"I am controlling my mind," Shinsei replied.

"How does one control one's mind?" Shiba asked.

Shinsei answered, "By silencing it."

After a moment more, Shiba asked, "How does one silence one's mind?"

Shinsei smiled and spoke thusly:

"In your mind, picture every sentient being in every realm, every stream, every ocean, and every inch of land. Picture the ten-thousands of lives existing in every plane of existence. Every human being, every animal, every insect, every fish, every Fortune, every thing that is capable of thought. They are so numerous as to approach infinity."

When Shiba had done this, Shinsei spoke thusly:

Soon after the ascension of the Moto to the rule of the Unicorn, a swordsmith called Moto Hazif found a way to adapt the methods used in forging katana to the creation of scimitars, forging gaijin blades which were more resilient and lethal. This caused a minor scandal in the Empire, with the Lion calling the process a blasphemy and demanding it be halted. The Unicorn, however, persisted in their efforts and the new weapons eventually came to be seen as just another of the clan's disturbing eccentricities. From the age of the Four Winds onward, the greatest warriors of the Unicorn Clan are gifted with Moto Scimitars, odd blends of Rokugani and gaijin influences... just like the Unicorn themselves.

THE BLACK STEEL BLADES

The existence of Black Steel Blades predates the so-called Spider Clan and even the appearance of the Dark Lord Daigotsu. Long ago, smiths of questionable motives and sanity discovered that mixing a small quantity of obsidian with steel while forging a blade could result in a dark-toned blade whose wounds were notably more painful. This process was passed around covertly by those who learned it, including bandits and ronin, and eventually came into the hands of the Lost. Those accursed beings noted that if the obsidian in the blade became Tainted, the sword would very readily pass that Taint on to those it injured. When Daigotsu organized the Lost into a functional army in the twelfth century, they began forging Black Steel Blades on a large scale – they were, after all, much easier to craft than weapons of pure obsidian. The dark steel swords of the Lost became almost as infamous as the Lost themselves, causing many a samurai to fall to the Taint.

After the Destroyer War, the so-called Spider Clan was granted Great Clan status by Empress Iweko I in exchange for protection from the Taint for all Rokugani unwilling to accept it. This reduced the potency of the Black Steel Blades significantly, although they were still undeniably deadly and their wounds were as painful as ever. A dark reputation still clung to the weapons despite their presumed inability to share the touch of Jigoku.

GAME MECHANIC NOTE: GMs running a game set in the Age of Exploration may wish to reduce the point cost of the Black Steel Blade Sacred Weapon Advantage (since it can no longer inflict the Taint), or change the ability of the blade – a suggested alternative would be a 4k2 katana which cause an extra +5 damage any time one or more of its damage dice explode.

"With all of your heart, sincerely wish and desire for every one of those beings to be saved from all suffering."

"Now, with all your heart, realize that so long as you desire this, not a single being can be saved."

Philosophies concerning the Five Elements often use the Elements as metaphors for natural phenomena, and martial philosophies are no exception. Earth's aspects are likened to Stamina and Willpower; emotionally, it is associated with being unmovable and stable. Fire is understood as Agility and Intellect; emotionally, it is passion and drive. Every one of the Elements can represent an important aspect of the warrior, manifesting in body and mind, as well as philosophy. What, then, is the martial understanding of Void, the Element of emptiness and fullness?

In Rokugan there are some warriors with whom the sword seems a natural extension of the arm, as much a part of the samurai as his own body. There are some who seem to sense when an ambush is imminent and are never surprised. There are some who, confronted with danger, have no hesitance; they run towards it, no thought given to defense, with the same subconscious reflex as drawing breath. They can be quick and still, strong and soft, thoughtful or without thought. Their movements are effortless, like the leap of a stag or the graceful dip of the crane as it reaches the river. Thought and action are one.

In martial arts, Void is about making connections. The secret of the unarmed strike is hidden in the push-up, the blocking motion of the bo staff is hidden in the broom's sweep, the eye of the archer is hidden in that of the sumi-e painter. Warriors attuned to the Void can tell what is about to happen without using their physical senses. They act without thought or hesitance, the drawing of the sword or the nocking of the arrow as natural to them as the drawing of their own breath. Void can be any other Element; it is the space between them, the one ring that links all other rings.

In Void-centric philosophies, embrace of the Void is everything. It is what truly separates a samurai from a mere warrior. It is not just that a samurai has superior training, or owns land, or holds himself to a code of honor. These things are proper for samurai, but they do not define them. It is the understanding and embrace of the Void that allows a samurai to do things that other lesser warriors cannot.

A Samurai's Understanding of Void

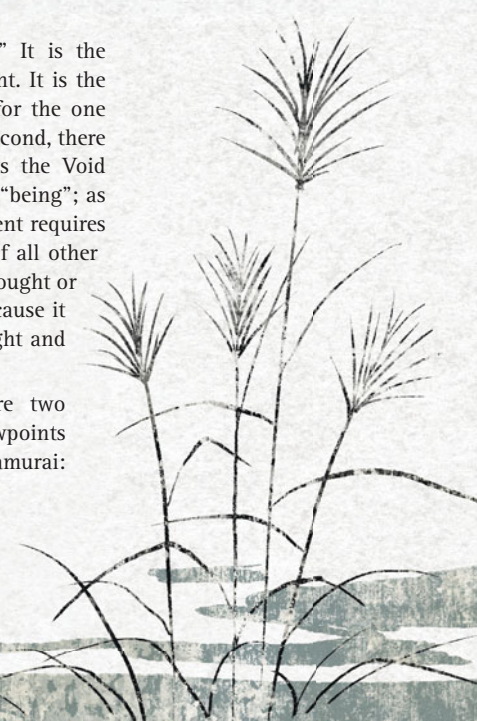
To monks and scholars throughout the Empire, Void represents concepts of emptiness and openness, and lacks any truly objective definition. To embrace the Void is to be free of preconceived notions; through this understanding, all existing forms are said to be "empty." The Tao of Shinsei teaches that Void is what links all other Elements together, fills in the spaces between all things, so that all things are ultimately comprised of the Void.

This is not the samurai understanding of Void, however.

As warrior nobles living in a strict martial culture, samurai strive to find martial applications for all philosophies, and Void is no different. While the academic and spiritual understanding of Void leans in philosophical directions, the samurai understanding of Void is less esoteric (comparatively speaking). A samurai who studies the Tao and the concept of Void from the same angle as monks or scholars may naturally have a richer understanding of the concept, but the search for practical martial applications for Void-centric philosophies has shaded the samurai's expression of the Element over the years.

In the eyes of samurai, Void simply "is." It is the immediate state of being in any given moment. It is the acceptance that there is no moment except for the one being immediately experienced. In that brief second, there is limitless potential. A samurai who accepts the Void has rejected any particular state of consistent "being"; as such, he can be whatever the immediate moment requires of him. In short, Void is simply the absence of all other Elements, where anything can arise without thought or action. A samurai seeks this state of being because it means there is no intermediary between thought and action.

Building upon this foundation, there are two prevailing and sometimes conflicting viewpoints regarding Void philosophy among martial samurai: Void as Emptiness, and Void as Fullness.





IS VOID THE SAME AS CHI?

'Chi' is understood by the Rokugani as life force and the spiritual energy inherent in all things. It is internal energy, not external force. Chi is the source of power, not its manifestation. Samurai seek to control their own chi (and that of their opponents) and thus attain greater focus and control over their own power. Someone without control over his chi is attacking ineffectively and mindlessly, while one with control over his chi attacks with control and purpose.

While this may seem similar to Void, it is not quite the same thing. The two ideas are linked, but distinct. Chi is what sustains life, a natural part of the body, as much physical as it is energy. People are born and reincarnate as a consequence of gathering chi. But Void can be anything... it is the space between Elements, that which binds and also separates. Void is potential, whereas chi is life. Whether or not chi is present, the Void is eternal. Perhaps Void can manifest as chi. But then, Void can manifest as anything.



VOID AS EMPTINESS

From this viewpoint, Void is absolute potential. A samurai's martial forms become "empty" when they are not restricted by the samurai's own thoughts or perceptions. Embracing emptiness is the rejection of any moment except the immediate, and of any world beyond that being experienced. For example, it is said that in a duel there is only one's own breath, one's own blade, and the opponent. By keeping his mind open of preconceived notions, a samurai can avoid deception in battle. By keeping himself "empty," he keeps his opponent guessing until the moment when a move is made. He does not need to think about drawing his sword or how to avoid an opponent's attack. He simply does. There is no intermediary between thought and action.

VOID AS FULLNESS

From this viewpoint, Void is the connection between things. It is the space between notes in a song, the blank space representing depth in a painting. It appears empty, but in truth, it is full. The space between musical notes is filled with silence, the blank space of the painting is filled with canvas. Simply put, space is substance. Void is energy before it is spent and realized. The space between two combative opponents is just as important as all the other factors in a fight, and what one does not do during a skirmish is often as important as what one does do. Samurai often seek to extend their engagement length, or "reach," while limiting that of their opponent; it can be said they seek to "fill the space," and there is more to this than simply stepping and striking. They seek to simplify their movements and limit needless embellishments in their strikes. By understanding the Void as fullness, these things can be accomplished. Less is more, even in combat.

Mushin no Shin

"Do you have any clue who I am?" the warrior menaced. "You are looking at a man who could cut you down without blinking!"

"And you," the courtier replied, "are speaking to a woman who can be cut down without blinking."

"Mushin no Shin" roughly means "no mind." It refers to the mental state that warriors try to achieve in combat, a desirable condition where the mind does not dwell on anything and all actions come only from instinct. In this state, the mind is free from fears, judgement, hesitation, ego, and any concept of self-preservation. Such thoughts are obstacles to action, and thus the samurai seeks to banish them. This concept can be related to the greasing of a wheel; when the mind seizes on any particular thought or notion, it is like a wheel that is too tightly affixed to an axle. It snags, holds, and fails to turn freely. The mind hesitates when confronted with sudden thoughts or notions, like one freezes at a sudden flash of light, or becomes distracted by one's own passing reflection. This hesitation can kill in a duel or battle. But when the mind is not concerned with anything, the wheel can turn freely.

This is a state of mind where thoughts do not dwell on themselves and all actions are automatic. In this mode, a samurai does not rely on plans, convictions, or ego. Instead, all action comes from instinct, driven by intuition and awareness. It is said that in a duel – or indeed any fight between samurai – to hesitate is death. Instead, the samurai seeks to cast away any sense of self, focusing not on the fight or even on his opponent. When the sword is in hand, the samurai is not formulating strategy, not thinking about his next move. In many ways, he simply is not there at all. There is no mind, no ego, no self. The samurai becomes a hollow shell guided by his weapon, reacting naturally to his opponent without the interference of thought or identity. In essence, it is not the samurai who attacks... it is his sword, wielded by subconscious instinct, that delivers the strike. And yet, for all his hollowness, the samurai is paradoxically also filled to the brim. He is not divorced from the world around him but simply a natural part of it. He is present, fully aware, and liberated from the chains of his own doubts and hesitations. In that moment, he is one with the Void. Empty, and yet so full.

The cultivation of *Mushin no Shin* is synonymous with a samurai's martial training. Indeed, many consider this trance-like state to be the mark of a true samurai. Kakita spoke of this mindset often in regards to the duel, saying that one had to overcome one's own thoughts and emotions in addition to one's opponent. His rival, Mirumoto, agreed as well; he did not teach stances or specific movements, hoping this would aid his students in cultivating their own style and martial instincts. Every dojo in the Empire teaches a different approach to martial practice and a different fighting technique, and every clan has different views on what mode of fighting is most effective, but the concept of *Mushin no Shin* is always considered a core teaching even in clans like the Crab and the Unicorn. It is common across every clan, every dojo,

and every martial style. It is the mark of a master, separating the “great” from the “good enough.”

The art of *Mushin no Shin* does not start and end with battle, however. This heightened level of mind, and the automatic awareness that comes with it, are desirable in all aspects of the samurai's life. Thus samurai seek to maintain this state of being throughout their lives, regardless of situation. Many do achieve this, but only through years of practice and dedication, or only very conditionally.

Consider an experienced artist. She does not think about what she is painting. She does not deliberately direct her brush across the canvas or dwell upon any one stroke. She simply paints what she sees, without thought or notion, driven only by her own enthusiasm, inspiration, and energy. She does not think, “now I will draw a thicker line,” or “now I will draw the flower's petals.” She just does it. At times, it can almost seem as though the brush is painting by itself. (Modern people would refer to this as being “in the zone.”) Whatever they call it, it is the state of mind where all thoughts cease and action becomes automatic. With enough practice, the activity becomes natural. It is second nature, requiring no more effort than taking a breath.

This is the purpose of a samurai's practice of kata. The kata is repeated, over and over, until it is second nature to the samurai performing it. It takes no effort to invoke the kata's flawless motions. The goal of the performer is to achieve the state of *Mushin no Shin* so that he may maintain it for long after the kata is completed.

EXAMPLES OF MUSHIN

In this state of mind it is said that a samurai can accomplish incredible feats he otherwise could not. The Empire hums with accounts and folktales of samurai who, having banished all doubt from their minds, achieved things that might be considered superhuman.

Examples of *Mushin* are abundant. A Dragon samurai is fired upon by an archer and draws his sword, cutting down the arrow in mid-flight before it can touch him. A Crab samurai leaps from the top of the Carpenter Wall, falling upon an Oni with tetsubo in hand, heedless of his own safety. A courtier throws herself upon an enemy's blade unflinching, tearing it from the foe's hands so that he is helpless against the court's guards. And yet for every dramatic example, there are a thousand others that are more subdued. Whenever a samurai acts without thought or hesitation, *Mushin* is there.

These are not things a mere warrior could achieve. Only a samurai, who has abandoned all sense of self and freed himself from all fear and emotion, can accomplish these things. This is what sets a samurai apart from a mere fighter.

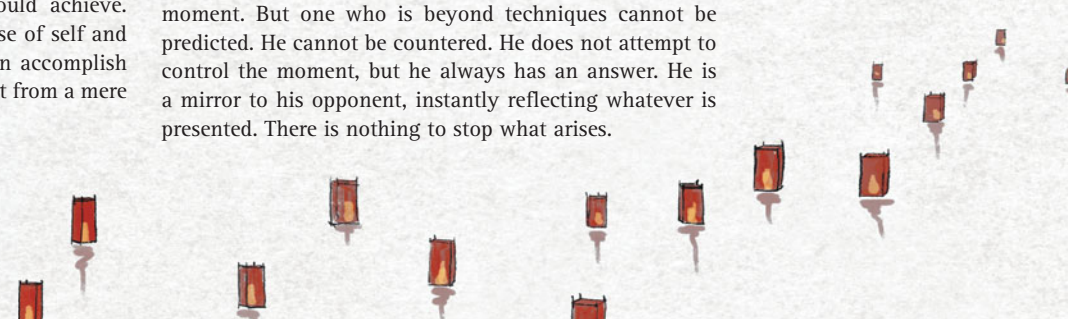


THERE IS NO TECHNIQUE

When the mind empties, it empties of all preconceived notions. During the fight or the duel, the samurai is not concerned with anything else. Not his reputation, his ego, his own life, or even the cost of victory.

This even includes one's own teachings. True masters of *Mushin no Shin* realize the futility of techniques and stances. They abandon notions of one weapon's superiority over another. They cease to see differences between styles and abandon their adherence to them. They simply become whatever the moment requires. This often baffles the student, who is concerned with progressing through ranks and learning a dojo's secrets. In truth, no one technique will defeat every opponent. There is no “Perfect Strike” to guarantee victory. There is only the Art. There is only Emptiness. The student will attempt to use the technique on the master, but the master knows it as he knows his own heartbeat, and cannot be struck.

In *Mushin*, there is no technique. This is the secret of all true masters. Those who have claimed to have learned the ultimate technique or the Perfect Strike to defeat their enemies display only a fundamental misunderstanding of the Art. They know only situational reactions, moves that can be used only under specific circumstances. These circumstances are plentiful in controlled environments, like the dojo or in practice, but one cannot force the tempo of a skirmish to conform to a technique. One cannot make the opponent always attack in a certain way, nor manipulate the circumstance of battle every single time. Techniques can be deciphered and countered. They can be factored into the opponent's plans. To venerate the Technique is a form of clinging. It is dwelling on the moment. But one who is beyond techniques cannot be predicted. He cannot be countered. He does not attempt to control the moment, but he always has an answer. He is a mirror to his opponent, instantly reflecting whatever is presented. There is nothing to stop what arises.





EVERYTHING IS EMPTY?

Shinsei's understanding of Void is somewhat different than the Empire's interpretation. To most samurai, Void is potential, the essence of existence. While this does not directly contradict the idea of Void as "emptiness," one could say that Shinseist monks take the concept a little farther.

In Shinseist philosophy, Void plays a very significant role. Shinsei taught that the Elements were linked together like a series of rings. Void was the ring that linked the other four together. When one comprehends that all Elements are manifestations of the Void, then one can achieve Enlightenment. Thus, in order to become Enlightened, one must embrace the inherent emptiness in all things.

The question then becomes: what does it mean for everything to be empty?

Simply that it is an unfilled vessel.

Emptiness does not mean "non-existent," any more than an empty cup is said to not exist. To say that all things are "empty" means that all things lack an intrinsic meaning, that there is no inherent substance or essence to these forms. Everything is impermanent and eroding. Things defy objectivity. Everything is inherently relative. That is the nature of the Void.

The Rings are the energy of the universe given material form. When one understands this, it becomes obvious that there is no difference between physical and spiritual, mind and body, or oneself and the world. Everything is empty of inherent definition.

Definitions are constricting. They give rise to expectation. But when you feel pain, are you the pain? When you feel happy, are you the happiness? Are you always your job? Are you always not? When we are not defined, only then can we become whatever is required.

Empty your cup.



Zanshin

"After a victory, tighten your helmet cord."

– Mirumoto Hojatsu

If mushin is a state of being empty, then surely *zanshin* is a state of being full. And yet, there is much that is similar about the two concepts, and many places where they overlap. *zanshin* is equally important to the samurai mindset, so much so that many consider it the mark of a true samurai. Beyond a samurai's training, *zanshin* is embraced by courtiers, monks, shugenja, and virtually every manner of Rokugani warrior.

"Zanshin" translates to "remaining mind" or "lingering spirit." It refers to a state of relaxed awareness in which the samurai is ready for anything. *Zanshin* is when the mind is fully aware of its surroundings and yet simultaneously at rest. It is not stirring, yet completely dwelling in the present moment. This is the opposite of a mind that wanders or a mind that clings.

Zanshin is the art of being only one thing at any moment in time. It is being fully present in whatever one is doing at that time. When a samurai polishes his sword, he is dwelling only on the action of polishing his sword. When he is writing a letter, he is dwelling only on the action of writing. When fighting, the samurai is thinking of nothing else except the fight. He is present, completely immersed in what is happening.

Some might think it ends there. For many, it does. They are content to embrace the philosophy of "do only one thing at once." But this is only the surface of *zanshin*. *Zanshin*, at its height, is much more than that. It is a way of life. A master maintains *zanshin* at all times; he is always aware of his surroundings, always present in the moment, regardless of emotional state or circumstance. He is ready for confrontation at any moment. He is pristine, like a spring pond at the dawn of morning, ever-still and yet reflecting all that looks within it. This state of mind requires years of training to develop. It is what *Kenshinzen* and *Kensai* have in common, the similarity between a courtier and a shugenja, the overlap between calligraphy and swordplay.

MAINTAINING ALERTNESS

"Calm your mind. The secret of the universe lies where the world stands still."

– Okaru, master sensei

When finishing a kata in the dojo or in demonstration, the samurai does not simply drop his stance and bow to his sensei or the audience. He maintains his final stance for several moments, as if he might be required to execute his kata again. Likewise, when a skirmish or a duel ends, the samurai does not simply sheath his weapon and move on. He maintains his combat awareness for a while longer. This is the first level of the practice of *zanshin*, to be always ready for the next challenge, ready in both body and mind.

The next step is being ready for martial activity from any position or stance. Even diplomacy is war, and a samurai must be ready to defend himself at any time. It is why

the samurai pays attention to where his sword is located, counting how many steps it will take for him to reach it. It is why a samurai practices the draw-and-cut from a seated position, as if one's tea is suddenly interrupted by violence. It is why samurai train blindfolded, heightening their other senses. It is why they meditate for hours. The goal is to develop this sense of awareness, this readiness for anything.

Eventually, this evolves from simply being aware of one's surroundings to being a true part of those surroundings. Rather than simply observing, one is instead experiencing. Whether one is at rest or one is in motion, heightened awareness is constantly maintained.

At the highest levels, one sees no break in martial activity. There is no "step a" and "step b," no stances, no breaks within movements. Everything is connected as a single graceful move, with no pauses or hesitation. Even if it is interrupted, it is completed. The archer is not finished once he has released the arrow, he must still follow through the motions and release his breath. The swordsman is not finished once he has drawn the sword and struck; he must follow-through with his strike, not stopping upon the contact of his blade. The monk cannot stop himself mid-stride or he will tumble. He cannot stop himself mid-air when he leaps. He must follow through on his step. He must commit. There is no time to correct oneself in a battle, no time to try again. zanshin means not clinging to the moment, but being whatever is required in any fraction of time.

The pinnacle of zanshin is single-minded devotion to one's Art. At this level, the samurai has transcended the distinctions of "moves." He does not divorce himself from his surroundings. He is as much a part of the dojo as his opponent, and his opponent's moves are his own moves. He is not a participant in a skirmish... he *is* the skirmish, as much as all other participants.

EXAMPLES OF ZANSHIN

To the untrained, zanshin seems to offer supernatural or mystical abilities to the samurai. The samurai seemingly senses his enemies before they attack. The samurai reads the intentions of his entertainer and does not drink the offered tea. The samurai understand his lord's wishes with only a glance, no words being passed between them, and executes them exactly as he expects. It is almost as if the samurai is psychic, or possessed by otherworldly perceptions, or perhaps receiving information from the kami.

But there is nothing supernatural occurring here. It is not magic. It is not mystical. It is simply a manifestation of one's awareness of the interconnectivity of all things. It is the result of direct participation in the moment. The samurai notices things because he is paying close attention... because he does not doubt the moment. He is not relying on his five senses, but neither is he ignoring them. It is not that the samurai has divorced himself from his surroundings and can therefore observe them. It is that he is truly a part of them, and thus he understands them.





This is not limited to martial applications alone. Courtiers, whose battlefield is politics and whose weapon is oration, must always be ready to debate or defend the clan's interests. Courtiers maintain the warrior mindset even as they are drinking tea or watching kemari. They cannot be swayed by niceties or honeyed words, lest they concede something important on an emotional whim. A courtier must only be moved when it benefits the clan. This is easier said than done; in the world of the courts there are all manner of earthly pleasures to tempt him, and if he gives in he might lose sight of what is best for his clan. So he plans for the future but lives in the immediate moment, instantly releasing that moment once it has passed. He banishes any notion of segmented time and is always ready to exercise his courtly prowess. He is a participant in the moment, but only just so, the same as it is for samurai.

Shoshin

"Empty your cup."

– *Shinsei*

"Shoshin" simply means "beginner's mind." It refers to the state of mind where one has not formed any preconceived notions about what is about to happen.

On his first day at the dojo, the student does not know what is expected of him. He does not know how to hold a sword, how to advance upon an enemy, or how to summon his martial spirit. But ideally he also has not made assumptions about what he is going to learn. He is eager to learn anything and open to what he is about to see. His mind is like an unworked piece of clay. At this moment his practice could go in any direction. He has infinite potential. He could end up anywhere.

He is like the Void.

As time passes, the student learns things. He learns how to hold a sword, how to advance on an enemy, how to summon his martial spirit. He becomes good at his practice in the dojo. He has learned the "right way" to do things. He is confident in his abilities, equipped with the experiences of his practices.

What happens, then, when the master attempts to show him another way? What happens when the student is confronted with something new and he must adapt to a new experience? What happens when the student is asked something he does not know?

One of two things. Either the student cannot let go of what he has learned and tries to make it work for the new situation – in which case he inevitably fails. Or, he realizes *he does not know* – and inevitably *learns something new*.

In the first example, the student fails because he is relying on what he has learned before as if it will suit every purpose. He has formulated a preconceived notion about what he is experiencing... the notion that his prior lessons are all he needs to succeed, or that the same method will always work. He believes his sparring partner will always strike the same way, or that one adhering to a particular style will always utilize a specific set of moves, or that his sensei will always want a specific kind of answer. Because he believes he knows the "right way," his mind is closed to new experiences. He can only ever look at a thing a specific way, only ever accept a single truth. This is just another form of living in the past, where old experiences are all that is relevant. A person in this mindset cannot learn anything new because he only relies on what he knows.

In the second example, however, the student returns to the "beginner's mind." He accepts that he does not know anything. Once more, he is open to what the master is showing him. He has no expectations about what is going to happen; he sets aside his doubts and preconceived notions, participates in the exercise genuinely, and experiences something new. He is able to gain new insights because he has not closed off his mind. And when the exercise is done, and he has experienced this new thing, he is able to decide how much, or little, he will incorporate it into his own thinking.

Once again, he is like the Void.

The true master always maintains his beginner's mind. No matter how old he becomes, no matter how many battles he has won, no matter how much he has learned, he is always ready to learn something new. He is always able to set experience aside where he can return to it later, and embrace the mindset of the beginner. The master can grasp a sword as if he has never touched one before, and open himself to a world in which he does not know... but soon he will.

Gaman

To many, *Gaman* is the essence of the warrior's spirit. It means to endure, with fortitude and dignity, that which is seemingly unendurable.

Gaman is the ability to exercise self-control and restraint in all aspects of one's life. It is the dedication to personal dignity and perseverance. It means to shoulder one's misfortune and carry on. To be stoic in the face of hardship.





When disaster strikes Rokugan, such as an invasion of oni, or a tsunami that destroys an important city, the pain and devastation of the event is undeniable. The people suffer terribly, losing loved ones and witnessing the destruction of their lives. Samurai and farmer alike feel undeniable loss. One might expect lawlessness, rioting, and the collapse of society in the wake of such world-shattering events. Yet this is not so. Instead, Rokugani shoulder their sorrows and carry on. They learn, they rebuild, and they endure. They are natives of a land that has forever attempted to destroy them, survivors of disasters that would have collapsed lesser Empires. What is it about the Rokugani that allows them to persevere? What is it in Rokugani culture that preserves order in the wake of such chaos?

It is the will to stand firm. To shoulder one's troubles and tough it out. To carry on regardless. This is *Gaman*. It is in the samurai's On, the soldier's unflinching march into a doomed battle, the Crab's stoic vigil on the Carpenter Wall, the Unicorn's quiet endurance of the scoffing of his peers, and the Dragon's unwillingness to abandon his actions even when others do not understand them.

This concept may seem strange to modern readers, inhabitants of individualist nations. After all, does not every individual have a right to shed his own tears? Is it not unhealthy to bottle up one's own feelings? Some may even misunderstand this quiet acceptance of ill circumstance as "giving up." This fails to understand the concept of *Gaman* and the subtle strength it lends. Rokugan is a collectivist society; the lives of individuals do not belong solely to them, and one's actions cannot be divorced from the consequences upon others. The emphasis is on the community, not the individual.

It is the quiet "carrying on" that allows Rokugan to bounce back from disaster, for a samurai family to recover lost face. The alternative is to create disharmony... to complain and disrupt, and how does this help things? Other places that are devastated may resort to looting or lawless rioting. These are negative actions that hinder, rather than help. But one who sees the world beyond his own nose can realize the fruitlessness of such action.

The practice of *Gaman* is a sign of maturity. It is the opposite of giving up; it is the acceptance of what has happened and the willingness to continue.

There is a story told in the Crane provinces. Before founding the Ashidaka family, Kakita Ashidaka was confronted by a ronin who was well known for his skill. The ronin wished to challenge Ashidaka and thus earn himself great fame. For the entire duel, the ronin hurled insults at Ashidaka, barbed words that caused all of his followers to flinch and clench their fists in outrage. But Ashidaka never acknowledged any of them. He simply held his stance and maintained his On. At last the ronin stopped his words, stared at Ashidaka, and then bowed, admitting defeat without so much as a drawn blade. After the ronin left, bewildered, Ashidaka's followers asked how he was able to endure such insults. Ashidaka's words are remembered to this day: "When a man offers you a gift, and you do not accept it, to whom does the gift belong?"

Clans Who Embrace The Void

At a certain level, of course, all samurai embrace Mushin/Zanshin and the ways of the Void. But there are some clans who can truly be said to embody the way of Void in their practices.

THE CRANE CLAN

The Crane philosophy of "excellence without effort" is very much in keeping with the Mushin philosophy, and so their embrace of the Void should come as no surprise. However, the Crane in general tend to lean most strongly in the direction of zanshin philosophy, especially among the Kakita and Daidoji. The Kenshinzen, the elite sword masters of the Kakita family, are said to draw heavily upon the Void in their techniques; they could be considered exemplars of the zanshin mindset. Doji courtiers are trained from birth to be zanshin-mindful of their surroundings, as are Daidoji Iron Warriors, although for different reasons. The Crane's dedication to grace and harmony also lends itself to the *Gaman* principle, and they are well-known for their ability to gracefully shoulder adversity.

THE DRAGON CLAN

The Dragon Clan are another Void-centric clan, in some ways the most Void-centric of all; the Dragon are said to understand the philosophic aspects of Void better than most others, embracing the absence of self even as they emphasize one's individual path. The Dragon martial traditions lean more in the direction of Mushin, and it is said that no two Mirumoto samurai's Niten techniques are alike. The Dragon are more likely to abandon technique than any others, and Mirumoto samurai are actually not taught specific stances or sword-grips, instead being encouraged to "hold the weapon naturally" and "investigate things thoroughly." Zanshin is still practiced, however, especially among the Kitsuki, whose training in the Kitsuki Method of investigation emphasizes oneness with one's surroundings and attentiveness to all that is happening. The Dragon also embrace the concept of Shoshin, and are more than willing to temporarily forget what they know in order to gain a new insight or perspective.

THE DRAGONFLY CLAN

Of all the minor clans, the Dragonfly most embrace the Void philosophy. They adhere to both the mushin and zanshin philosophies, blending them together in a "one moment" mindset. Their belief in Insight over written knowledge exemplifies both mushin and zanshin simultaneously. They embrace the beginner's mindset in their teachings, and due to the hardships experienced by all minor clans, practice the stoic *Gaman* philosophy assiduously. Indeed, the Dragonfly are often regarded as the greatest of the Void philosophy's advocates... although rarely does this aid their obscure reputation.



THE PHOENIX CLAN

If the Dragon best understand the philosophical aspects of Void, then the Phoenix understand the mystical aspects of the Element. The Phoenix Ishiken do more than study the mindset of Mushin... they live it. *Mushin no Shin* is a lifestyle to all Void shugenja, who are trained to understand the Void better than any other. The same goes for the Henshin mystics, who are intimate with the secret cycle of rebirth and reincarnation. The Path of Man explicitly calls the body a "hollow vessel," and the ever-forward march of humanity toward its destiny only reinforces Mushin principles. However, the Shiba lean more towards the zanshin mindset, which is practical for their duties. A yojimbo needs to be vigilant and observant, and there can be no hesitation when the time for action arrives.



Martial Arts and the Void: Kukan-do

Although samurai are first and foremost masters of weapons, it should not be too surprising that in an Empire of warriors there are many unarmed martial art traditions. In addition to the many schools practiced by samurai families and monastic orders, there also exists a martial art for every physical element. Kaze-do is the martial art of Air, Mizu-do is the martial art of Water, Hitsu-do is the way of Fire, and many consider Sumai to be the unarmed combat style of Earth. What, then, of the ephemeral Void? Is there a "Way of Void," a "Kukan-do?"

Yes... and also, no.

Throughout the Empire, many different martial arts claim to be Kukan-do, the Art of Void. This is because Kukan-do does not exist in the same way as Kaze-do or Mizu-do. Those are actual martial art styles with codified methods and forms. But in truth, there is no literal "kukan-do." Kukan-do does not refer to a specific martial art; rather, it refers to an all-encompassing martial philosophy in which the fighting art is non-divorcible from any other aspect of the practitioner's daily life. Philosophically, any martial art that emphasizes the zanshin mindset and/or the principles of mushin could be called "Kukan-do." For that matter, any sufficiently embraced martial art could be considered an aspect of kukan-do. To call someone's art "Kukan-do" is to pay one of the highest compliments; it means the practitioner has embraced his martial art as a way of life. It means his art transcends the constraints of form and function, and is as useful to him in times of peace as in times of war, whether he is sweeping a monastery floor or battling enemies. To some it seems as if he has had no training at all, for every move is natural. He creates new forms spontaneously, acts before any thought compels him to act, and elevates his art beyond simple war.

In one corner of the Empire, a Kakita samurai completes an inkbrush painting with the same stroke he once used to defeat a rival duelist. Far from him, a Shinjo samurai closes her eyes and launches a humming-bulb arrow from the back of a horse, unleashing a signal to peers who are miles away. A Mirumoto kneels for tea as he did in the dojo. A Bayushi courtier enters a courtroom with the same mindset and purpose as an Akodo general who at the same moment marches his forces across the plains. There is a Shiba who fights his own ego; he strikes his shadow with the echo of a bamboo shinai. There are a hundred wars being fought in this very moment. Everyone can be a warrior at any given moment. This is kukan-do; every mode of existence is simply one facet of one infinite jewel.

Some martial artists believe that every martial art shares certain principles, methods, and philosophies that cannot be defined in words, overlapping in ways that are not easily explained or demonstrated. It is said that where these arts overlap is where one will find kukan-do. To such warriors, the Way of Void is like the trunk of a great tree, with all the other martial arts in the Empire resting nestled in its branches.

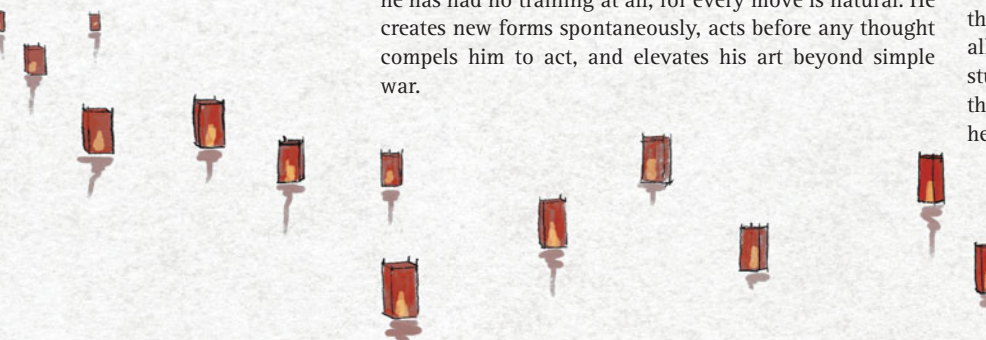
Even so, perhaps some arts are situated closer to the trunk than others...

THE VIRTUE OF SWEEPING

Somewhere in the Empire, perhaps at this very moment, two students arrive at the dojo of an eccentric Togashi sensei. The sensei takes on only a few students at a time, and he lives in a very remote place, far from civilization. The students are eager to learn the techniques and methods of their new teacher; he is a renowned expert on Kaze-do, but they are here to learn something else entirely... the art of kukan-do, a martial art supposedly so powerful that no other weapon or technique can match it. They have only just heard of such an art, and their heads are filled with dreams and aspirations of mastering this secret mode of combat.

Upon arriving, the sensei takes both of the students into the dojo, announcing that their training will begin at once. He gives each student a straw broom, instructing the first to sweep the floor and the other to sweep the cobwebs from the ceiling. Confused, the students nevertheless do as they are told, spending the next five days sweeping the dojo from top to bottom, all under the watchful eye of their sensei. If a student misses a spot, the sensei immediately tells him to fall to his knees and perform a set of pushups. From time to time, the students wonder if perhaps they are simply being tested. The sensei must be trying to discover if they are worthy of his secrets. So they carry on without complaint.

After the first week, the dojo is clean. The students are ready to begin their martial training. The sensei instructs them to go to the garden... and then orders them to pull all the weeds from the soil. Again they obey, but now the students are wondering what might be going on. Was there some kind of mistake? Does the sensei think they are here simply to do chores?





Every week there is a new chore. The rugs within the dojo require beating. The zen garden requires raking. The shrine needs new waters from a nearby stream. The steps need sweeping. The clothes need cleaning. There are chores and chores, nothing but chores. Not once have the two spent even a minute sparring in the dojo, nor have they learned so much as a stance from the old man. They are not students at all, but merely servants to him.

And worse, the students can never perform their chores to the old man's satisfaction; he corrects them constantly. "Hold the stick like this," he orders. "Sweep the floors like this," he commands. They cannot even do their pushups correctly. "Put your hands by your hips," he orders, "originate the force from your gut, and scrape your elbows against your flanks as you push away from the floor." The pushups are harder under his instructions; sometimes he makes them push with their knuckles, sometimes with their fingertips. And if they make a mistake... more pushups for them. And while he watches, he is drinking tea, or painting, or some other leisurely activity. Once, one of the students even catches him napping instead of watching!

"This is no way to study," one student complains. "We haven't learned one thing under this master!" The other dares not answer, but he too has his doubts.

A year has passed. The students have grown lean and strong from their constant chores, but the sensei has not spoken to them once regarding his supposed secret martial art. He refuses to share his secrets, even after all this time. At last, while sweeping the floor, a student looks up at the sensei. He is painting a picture with a sumi-e brush. Quietly, the sensei paints a circle on a white page. He leaves the circle uncompleted at the top.

The student asks, "Master, when will we learn the secrets of kukan-do?"

"There is no kukan-do," the master replies.

Enraged, the student screams: "I can take it no more! You have fooled us into doing your chores, old man! You are a liar and a deceiver!" He lifts up his broom and strikes at his sensei, aiming for the old man's head.

But the broom misses; the sensei has deflected the blow using only his paintbrush.

This only makes the student angrier. The old man knows martial secrets, but he will not share them? What is the point of studying under him, then? "I am leaving!" he declares.

"Leave the broom," the sensei says. But the angry student takes the broom with him out of spite. He leaves the dojo, never to return. When he reaches the lands of the Dragon, he will tell everyone the sensei is a fraud, that he spent an

entire year doing meaningless chores instead of studying, that the goodwill and coin of his daimyo were wasted on an ancient fraud who shames the name of every Togashi sensei.

But he does not make it to the lands of the Dragon. That night, his lonely camp is beset by three bandits, criminals waiting for travelers in the mountains. The boy has no time to think; he can only defend himself. Without thought he grabs the broom, the only weapon he has. Instincts take over; before his own shocked eyes, he sweeps the ground with the broom, tripping his first attacker. Spinning to deal with the second, he thrusts the broom in the same way the sensei taught him to sweep the ceiling. It connects, and his second attacker goes down. The last bandit is strong, and he wrenches the broom from the student's hands. Without thinking, the student pushes his attacker... and his eyes widen as his attacker sprawls to the ground, knocked senseless. The student realizes that his push instinctively originated from his gut, his elbows brushing against his flanks as he pushed. As the bandits scramble to their feet and run from him in terror, the student ignores them and looks into his campfire. He understands.

Somewhere in the Empire, a student is returning to his dojo. He is crossing the threshold with a broken broom in his hands. He is glanced at by his peer, who is doing pushups from his knuckles. It looks oddly like a punch, locked away and hidden in the pushup's movements. A way that leads to another way. A way that leads to all ways.

The student is standing before his sensei. His face is red. He kneels. He bows. His forehead touches the floor.

The sensei is drinking tea. "The gardens need weeding," he says.

And the student obeys.

This is the start of wisdom. This is the start of kukan-do.





ARCHERY OF THE VOID

"A great archer does not draw the bow. He pushes the arrow."
— Tsuruchi

The yumi is one of the most noble and illustrious weapons in Rokugan's history, as noble to some as the katana or wakizashi. Among the Tsuruchi, the bow is actually venerated as greater than the sword. The Daidoji train with the yumi for weeks at a time, perfecting the art of kyujutsu with the same grace and serenity as the Kakita show with the sword. Even the Unicorn, with their yomanri archers, hold the yumi in highest esteem. The bow is extremely powerful, capable of a 30-45 pound draw and incredible accuracy, but it is also fragile. Properly cared for, a yumi can last for generations, passed down from master to student, but if mistreated or neglected it lasts only for a matter of days.

WHAT ABOUT THE KUKAN-DO KIHŌ?

Previous editions of L5R contains a kiho called "Kukan-do," an esoteric maneuver connected to Void that is practiced by certain monks. It is considered extremely dangerous, as it requires the user to draw the very essence of the Void in upon himself and align his chi with its power. All things are at their most basic in the Void, and those subjected to this mystical kiho are no exception. It is an extremely difficult kiho to perform, requiring a comprehension of the Void that is beyond most human beings.

There are those in the Empire who believe the term "kukan-do" refers only to the kiho and not some larger philosophical martial concept. However, because of the uncommon and mysterious nature of kiho, there are many more who have never heard of the kiho at all. For the purposes of this section, therefore, we use the term "kukan-do" solely to refer to general philosophical tendencies within the martial arts.



An archer lives his life in the same way he uses his bow.

Right now, a young kyudoka challenges an archer of the Tsuruchi. Heir to a proud tradition of archers, she has already defeated three of the Tsuruchi's students, and now she seeks to defeat the master and make a name for herself. She challenges him publicly, in the square of a crossroads village.

"I can match any shot you make," she boasts. "No matter how difficult, I can best you. I have trained under three archery masters in three different dojo. I have won the Bowman's Wager at Winter Court. I have bested all of your students. I can also beat you!"

The Tsuruchi nods with interest. He is old, very close to retirement. He accepts the challenge. A crowd gathers around them.

The woman fires an arrow. It is a challenging shot, aiming at a fist-sized target very far away at a difficult angle. She even closes her eyes when she fires, releasing her breath as she releases the string. The arrow lands dead on its target. The crowd erupts into cheers. It is unbelievable! She looks triumphant.

The Tsuruchi smiles. "That is quite good," he says. She bristles and the crowd goes silent. Quietly, he packs his bow and arrows, slinging them on his back. "Follow me," he says, "if you want to defeat me."

She obeys, packing her things and following him out of the village. The confused crowd follows them for a while, but as they go farther, the peasants slowly trickle away until it is just the woman and the old Tsuruchi. They travel for hours, following the road to a gentle cleft in the valley where the terrain is rocky and harsh. She grows impatient, thinking perhaps he is stalling.

At last they come to a great canyon. The Tsuruchi points; there is a large painted target on the opposite wall of the canyon. Below them, the canyon drops into a river with churning rapids. It is a long drop; it would be impossible to survive a fall.

Without hesitation, the Tsuruchi leaps. He lands on a small island outcropping. There is only enough space for one foot. He balances perfectly, but even the slightest breeze will hurl him into the chasm and to his death. The young kyudoka is horrified at the sight.

The Tsuruchi calmly chooses his arrow, nocks it, and draws the string. He does not flinch or hurry, even as the wind stirs above and beneath him. He draws a single breath, and releases. The arrow lands directly at the center of the target. The shot is flawless.

Leaping back to safety, he gestures for the woman to try. But she does not budge. "That proves nothing!" she stammers. "The target is closer than the one I shot in the village. And larger! And for that matter, it is an easier angle!"

"And yet you will not do it," he says.

She has nothing to say.

He shakes his head. "You have the eye of an archer. You even have the skill of an archer. But you do not possess an archer's heart."

This is also kukan-do.



TO WIN WITHOUT STRIKING

"The Enlightened Win Before The Fight." – Sun Tao

There is a tea house far from the center of the Empire, in lands where vice is sometimes confused with virtue. In this moment, inside the tea house, there is a woman seated beside the hearth, taking her warmth from the smoldering charcoal. She is blind, white bandages around her eyes, and garbed in a brown kimono. She is a ronin; her sword is at the entrance of the teahouse, as is custom. She sips her tea, content in a world of darkness.

A man bursts into the teahouse. He is armed. The patrons scream and duck away from him. The man does not care for propriety, instead readying his sword and marching to the table occupied by another man, his quarry: a disreputable sneak and gambler. They argue over money, or a woman, or some other lowly matter. It is a scene that has unfolded before, here and elsewhere. The conversation grows more heated. There can be no resolution. Angered, the armed man reaches to draw his sword and cut the other down.

The blind woman speaks. "Stay your blade, I pray you."

"Why should I?" the man retorts. "This man has insulted me! He needs to die!"

"Not here," she replies. "I cannot advise it. It would go badly for you."

"You know nothing about this matter," he snarls. "You are just a blind woman. What would you know?"

The blind woman smiles again. She gestures lazily toward the door. "There is a man hiding there with a dagger in his hand. If you attack, he will throw it, and it will sink into your back. Come on out, young man."

The armed man is stunned. The one behind the door peers out into the room, unsure how the blind woman knew he was there.

"And you," she says to him, "upon throwing your dagger, you will be countered by the woman hiding in the kitchen, who is about to charge out with her cleaver. Come out, young lady. You are still there, yes?"

Sure enough, one of the kitchen servants shuffles into the room, cleaver in hand, dumbfounded.

The blind woman sighs. "I am sad to say, you too would meet your end. Because the gambler is carrying a dart-flute in his kimono. He would shoot it at you, and it is likely it would strike you. Too late to stop you from killing the dagger-thrower, of course, but soon enough for him to try and escape."

The would-be assailants exchange looks. They are looking at each other's weapons. They are looking into each other's eyes. They are looking at the blind woman.

She is sipping tea.

"So," the seated gambler says, "blind woman! You are saying I win, ultimately?"

She shakes her head. "No." She motions to the door, where her sword sits. "I kill you, with that blade." She frowns at him. "Because you were the cause of all this trouble."

A LOVE POEM

The following love letter was once sent to Doji Barahime at a prominent winter court. Although the author never identified himself, it was noted that the letter was written on paper in the color of the Dragon Clan.

If I keep thinking that I will stop thinking about you

Then that means I am still thinking about you.

I suppose I will have to stop thinking

That I will stop thinking about you.



His face goes pale. He looks at the man standing across from him, still caught in mid-reach for his sword. They look at one another carefully. A tense moment passes.

The gambler stands up. Slowly. He finishes his sake. He puts a coin on the table. He leaves.

One by one, they all leave.

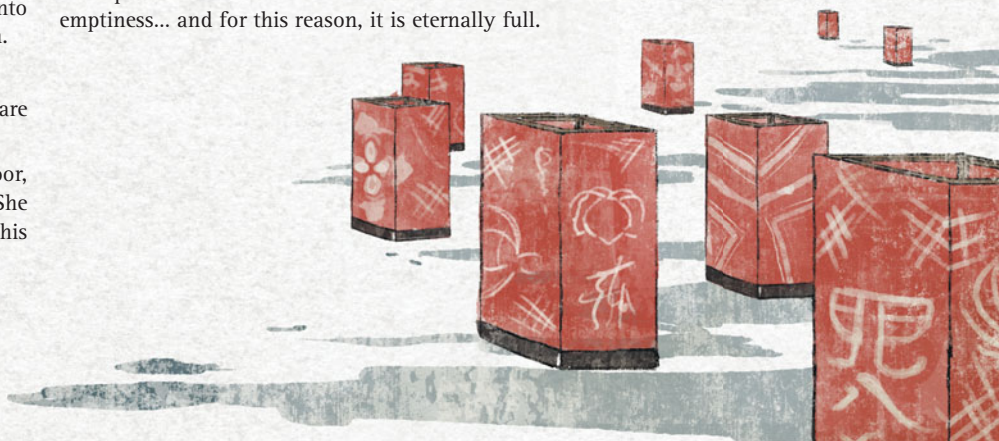
The blind woman smiles and asks for another cup of tea.

THERE IS NO PATH

Kukan-do is not about fighting. It is about focused attention and awareness. It is about elevation of one's activities so they flow with "the forms" as they exist in the eternal void. One's calligraphy could contain kukan-do, as could one's speech, or one's actions. For the master chef, it could be said his cooking contains kukan-do; for the actor, his portrayals of others could be so complete, flawless, and without effort as to be another expression of kukan-do. It is not simply that being good at one thing makes a person good at martial practice. It is the complete dedication of self to the perfection of one's life's work. For a samurai, whose life work is martial, this demands that everything he does leads to the perfection of fighting.

Everything a samurai attempts is war.

Philosophically, kukan-do is simultaneously the acceptance that there are multiple representations of the same thing, and the rejection of true duality. There is no distinction between what is internal or external, no separation of man from environment, nor mind from body. Thought and deed are as one, and both have internal and external consequence in equal measure. There is not even a distinction between the Elements, for they are all but representations of the Void. The essence of the world is emptiness... and for this reason, it is eternally full.



Mysteries and Enigmas of the Battlefield

Rokugani soldiers are a superstitious lot. After all, the average samurai is deeply pious, used to knowing there are things beyond his control and understanding. And a life of warfare does little to dissipate such a feeling: proximity with death leads one to adopt odd beliefs, while the chaos of the battlefield can make a warrior think he has seen things which were not necessarily there. This section discusses a number of legends which are popular among Rokugani warriors, legends which may or may not hold any truth. Whether they do is, as always, up to GM.

Ninja in Rokugan

"Laugh at my superstitions if you like. When the spirits drag you away, I will be the one laughing."

— An angry peasant

The word *ninja* in Rokugan conjures vastly different images, depending on who one asks. For some the concept of "ninja" is mere superstition, an excuse for lazy guards and incompetent investigators. For others it means a highly trained assassin, a man able to slip in undetected and murder with total impunity. And for others yet, it represents an inhuman figure of darkness, a murderous monster which nothing can stop short of a miracle.

The reason for this disparity lies in the complex origins of the term. The Scorpion are in a large part responsible; as recounted in the L5R 4th Edition supplement *The Great Clans* (page 225), after making a public display of disbanding their network of spies, they drew on public superstition and fears to mask their later activities. It was also the Scorpion who gave the sinister entity known as the Lying Darkness a foothold in Rokugan, and its minions pursued their own mysterious designs, giving rise to other legends of the supernatural ninja. A third but less overt

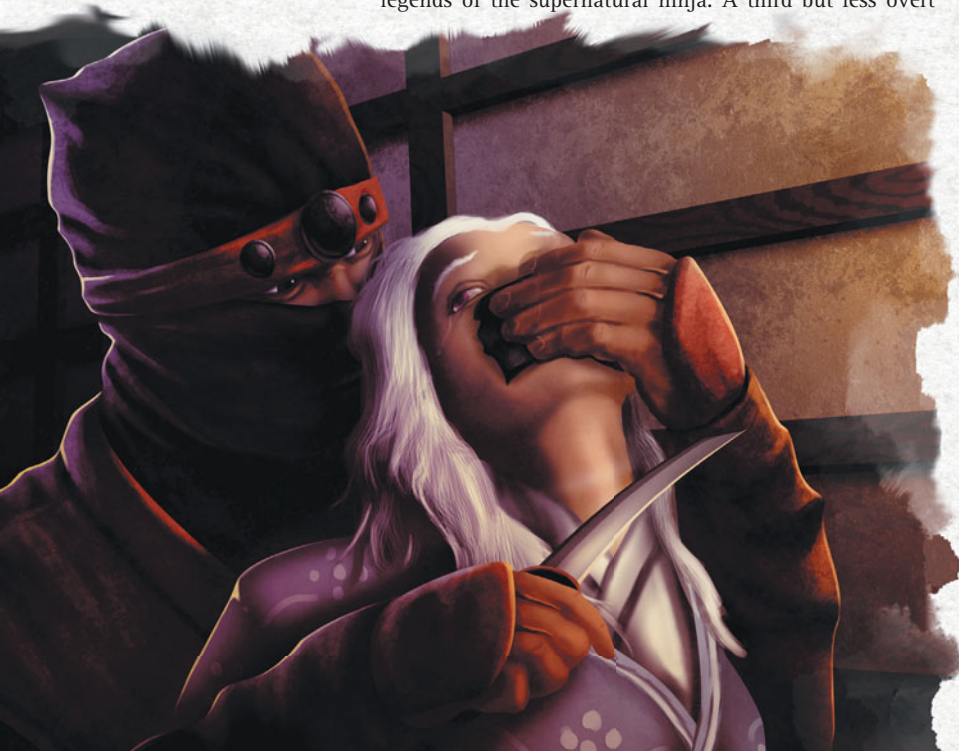
source of ninja rumors was the conspiracy called the Kolat, which trained its own networks of spies and assassins – and ironically, opposed both the Scorpion and the Lying Darkness. Information on the activities of the Kolat and the Lying Darkness can be found in Chapters Three and Seven of the L5R 4th Edition supplement *Enemies of the Empire*.

But these three groups are not the only ones responsible for rumors of ninja around the Empire. Sometimes, samurai are right in believing ninja are an excuse. A village might revolt and murder a ruthless tax collector, dispose of his body... and blame shadowy assassins. A guard who falls asleep during his duties and then learns a precious item has been stolen will deny ever failing in his attention, blaming a ninja with abilities beyond the human ken. A yojimbo who finds himself unable to step in between his charge and a lethal arrow might report to his superiors that a mysterious killer appeared out of nowhere to commit the ghastly deed. Such rumors tend to take on a life of their own; sometimes a series of murders blamed on the same ninja will actually be a set of completely unrelated cases which the culprits all blame on the same excuse. This of course can make the life of a magistrate quite difficult, particularly a magistrate who believes ninja do exist, since he must spend much time and effort sorting out what is rumor and what is truth. And of course sometimes the rumors, while equally false, are not malicious. Legends have a way of influencing the common subconscious, so a confusing or uncertain incident might give rise to a sighting of a "ninja." Murderers and other unsavory individuals sometimes play on the common fear of ninja, dressing in black to carry out their activities or leaving a cheaply made shuriken at a crime scene to confuse observers.

Many of these "ninja" legends and stories are quite persistent and keep surfacing in different places in the Empire, so it is possible that there may be grains of truth behind them. What follows are three examples of stories which might be the result of secret groups of ninja in the Empire... or might be mere stories.

THE KOGA NINJA

At the dawn of the Empire, small villages were often isolated and could hope for little protection from the new-made samurai caste. Some samurai, drunk with their recently acquired power, abused their status to extort money and whatever else they wanted from the peasants. In one such village lived a man named Koga. When a tax collector committed one too many sins against his people, Koga murdered him – and when the authorities came, villagers blamed a mysterious dark figure and Koga was never suspected. Koga recruited more men and women like him, making them all swear allegiance to his name, and started a secret family of ninja whose sole goal would be to protect the population of Rokugan. Although Koga's village was eventually destroyed during one of Rokugan's many wars, the network of those who bear his name extends far beyond that one small village. They maintain secret houses where they train far from samurai eyes, in small isolated villages or uninhabited places. The



Koga are masters of infiltration, for they belong to a class of people rarely looked at twice. Many samurai cannot tell one servant from another, much less suspect a commoner of an elaborate murder. The Koga also have intimate knowledge of the plants and animals of Rokugan, and have developed a knowledge of natural poisons which approaches that of the Shosuro family. While the Koga are not samurai (and would be offended to be compared to samurai), they take their oaths very seriously and will murder any of their own who attempts to leave their organization. They are a threat only to those who endanger the peasantry, and refuse to take part in any other kind of conflict, enabling them to remain outside the influence of other groups such as the Kolat.

THE HATERU NINJA

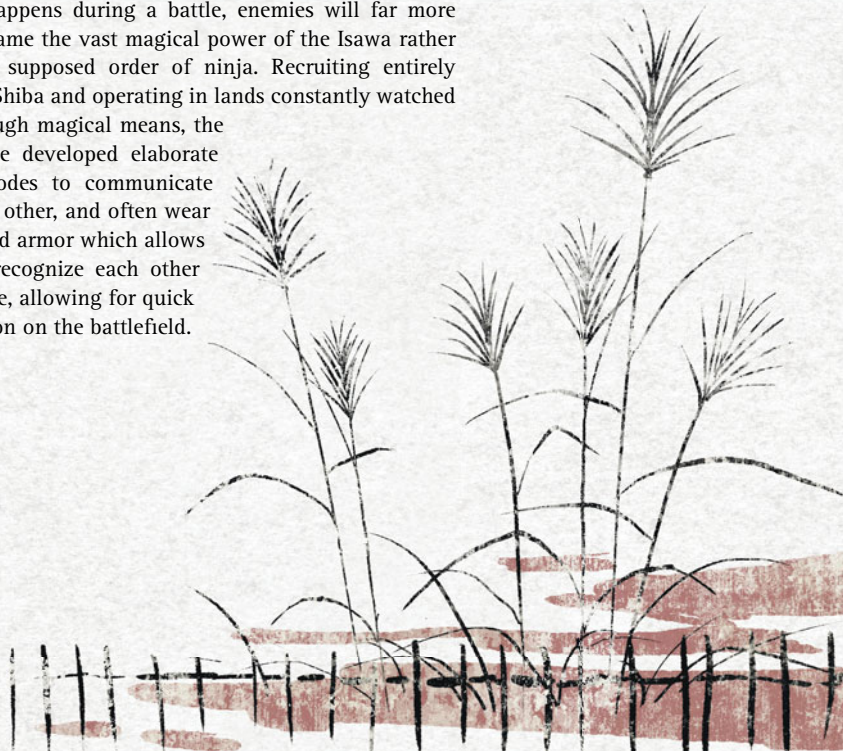
In contrast to the Koga, the Hateru ninja family is almost exclusively composed of samurai. Founded by followers of Ide who remained in Rokugan when the Ki-Rin Clan departed, the Hateru lost all faith in honor and the Emperor when the Lion brutally invaded their lands. While the other samurai displaced from the lands of the Ki-Rin would eventually become the Fox Clan, the Hateru took a darker path and established themselves in a remote corner of Dragon Clan territory. There they developed skills as spies and assassins, offering their sinister services to those willing to hire them – crime lords and corrupt daimyo, jilted lovers and scheming courtiers. The Hateru refuse no contract so long as their exorbitant prices are met. One does not contact the Hateru – they scout Rokugan for potential customers and offer their services through indirect methods, such as coded messages or whispered conversations in opium dens. In public they often pose as Dragon samurai, and one way they acquire customers is through infiltration of the Kitsuki family, from which they obtain extensive information on the criminal class of Rokugan. All the money they earn is sent back to the small Hateru village in the Dragon mountains, where retired assassins and their families live in comfort. The path to the village is the most closely kept secret of the family, and outsiders who become aware of it are immediately killed. The fact that the Dragon have never learned of their identity or the location of their home speaks volumes to their skill, and the Hateru ninja make a point of leaving false clues to make sure the Dragon Clan does not suspect their true location. While they do not consider themselves samurai of the Ki-Rin or Unicorn Clan, the Hateru use a small tattoo of a Ki-Rin to identify each other, and maintain some of the ancient customs of the clan in private even as they often pose as Dragon in public.



THE SESAI NINJA

The Sesai also recruit from the samurai caste, but where the Hateru have abandoned honor for greed, the Sesai consider themselves loyal servants of the Phoenix Clan. Founded by a zealous member of the Shiba family who swore to balk at nothing to defend the Isawa, the Sesai often recruit from skilled but failed yojimbo, convincing them they can still serve the clan if they are willing to use different methods. The Sesai bring the new recruits to their fortress in the Mountains of Regret, where they receive extensive new training. Once ready, the newly trained Sesai are sent home and resume their duties as members of the Shiba family... until the head of the Sesai calls them into action.

More than any other group of ninja, the Sesai often turn their talents toward the battlefield. Sabotage, infiltration, and assassination are some of the tools they use to give the Phoenix army a secret edge. The irony is that if anything strange happens during a battle, enemies will far more readily blame the vast magical power of the Isawa rather than any supposed order of ninja. Recruiting entirely from the Shiba and operating in lands constantly watched over through magical means, the Sesai have developed elaborate written codes to communicate with each other, and often wear customized armor which allows them to recognize each other at a glance, allowing for quick cooperation on the battlefield.





The Ninja's Touch: Poison in Rokugan

"Any unexplained illness is always the start of a new plague or a case of poisoning. Usually they blame the Scorpion or the Shadowlands. Sometimes both."

— *Seppun Katsura*

In a land where honor is paramount and samurai pride themselves on their martial abilities, the very idea of poison is reviled. Proven use of poison is considered murder under any circumstances in Rokugani law, and even when poison does not result in the death of the target the poisoner will often be executed regardless. Poison is the tool of the coward, the malevolent – and the ninja. Whether substantiated or not, this last possibility strikes fear into the heart of the Rokugani, and when a mysterious death occurs, rumors quickly start to circulate. Often, such rumors are not really accurate; the arts of medicine in Rokugan are limited and it can be difficult to differentiate between poisoning, illness, magic, or a natural death.

Some groups do use poison, and find the ninja to be a common excuse behind which they can conceal their activities. The greatest masters of poison knowledge are the samurai of the Shosuro family. Astonishingly, this is not even a secret, for the gardens of Shiro no Shosuro hold the Empire's greatest variety of poisonous plants – but the Shosuro claim this is to be able to study treatments and share their knowledge freely shared with the Emerald Magistrates, providing a fig leaf of legal cover for their activities. Of course, the Scorpion know of many more poisons which they hide from those same Emerald Magistrates. However, they prefer to use poison sparingly

so as to avoid giving their enemies too many chances to find antidotes. Besides, the fear of poisoning is often an even more powerful tool than poisoning itself. On the battlefield, a rare unit known as the Scorpion Claws is sometimes deployed which uses the chaos and confusion of large scale warfare to pursue its own objectives – namely the elimination of high priority targets through the use of poisoned sai.

While most of the poisons used by the Shosuro family are either simple compounds or natural substances, more complicated ones exist, legends of which can be heard among the less savory circles of Rokugani society. Whether they really exist or are mere rumors is, as always, up to the GM to decide.

Night Silk (not to be confused with Night Milk) is supposedly the most potent poison in the arsenal of the Scorpion, and a mystery to all other groups. Rumors about its fabrication, its antidotes (or lack thereof), and its symptoms vary so much that most magistrates believe it to be merely an intimidation tool used by the Scorpion. If it does exist, Night Silk can supposedly kill any target in a mere moments, stifling their voices so they cannot call for help.

The Crimson Lotus is a unique poison: it does not kill its victim, but rather causes intense pain a few hours past its ingestion. The only antidote is more Crimson Lotus, making it a choice between a life of suffering or a permanent addiction. Supposedly, the Crimson Lotus has been used by blackmailers when other methods have failed, and those who know of the Kolat believe it makes great use of the substance. The flower from which it is made reputedly grows only by a small lake somewhere in Unicorn lands, far from any settlement of note.





The Seeds of Madness, originally found in the Burning Sands, have supposedly found their way to Rokugan through various smuggling groups, and are highly sought after in the criminal underworld. Anybody ingesting the seeds will suffer from severe hallucinations, often resulting in violent crimes. Temporary madness resulting in murder is sometimes blamed on the seeds, but since their existence has never been confirmed it remains impossible to prove. The seeds are rumored to grow inside a sweet delicious fruit, and are only dangerous when taken out and left to dry for at least a week.

Ghost Armies

While no true samurai would ever admit to giving in to the sin of Fear, there is one type of tale which makes even veteran warriors address a prayer of protection to the kami: the tales of the ghost armies which take the field of battle in strange circumstances, most often to fight against the living. Thousands of soldiers live their whole lives without seeing a single ghost, even less an army of them, yet these legends persist. Shugenja scholars point at the existence of Toshigoku and the occasional weakening of the barrier separating that realm from the mortal world as the source for these legends of ghost armies. However, some of the stories conflict with such a simple explanation, with no signs of involvement from the Realm of Slaughter but evidence of spiritual presence all the same. Maho-tsukai have also been blamed for these legends on occasion, but the truth is some of these reports of ghost armies have no rational explanation... save perhaps the mysterious will of the spirits. What follows are some of the most famous and generally accepted ghost army tales, although there are many others. As always, the GM is free to decide whether there is an element of truth to any of these stories... or not.

THE LION GHOSTS OF THE SEIKITSU

Sometime in the sixth century, a Scorpion legion commanded by one Bayushi Suneke found a pass in the Seikitsu Mountains which had never been described on any maps. At the time, tensions with the Lion were high, and Suneke decided to seize the opportunity to attempt to strike deep into Lion territory, believing the pass was not guarded. However, he and his troops found a lone Lion Clan samurai barring their way. The man politely but firmly asked them to go back to their own territory. When Suneke refused, the Lion warrior drew his sword... and out of thin air an entire army of Lion appeared around him, charging the Scorpion troops. The Scorpion warriors defended themselves to the best of their ability but were eventually overrun, with Suneke himself killed by the mysterious warrior he had encountered. Only a single young recruit was spared – an oddity which some later attributed to his mother having been born a Lion. The

TOOLS OF THE NINJA

In the Rokugani view, “ninja weapons” are the hallmarks of a true ninja. Any criminal can be an assassin, but the use of a shuriken, ninja-to, or blowgun proves that one has been specifically trained to murder. These weapons often confuse samurai, who find them crude and inferior to proper samurai armaments. There are a number of reasons for this. The Scorpion Clan deliberately sends out shinobi with poor-quality gear, tasked with serving as distractions for more experienced assassins. More generally, even the most experienced ninja often prefer to delay, poison, or otherwise distract their opponents, things for which a shuriken or a blowgun is much more useful than a katana. Also, most ninja lack the resources to craft high-quality weapons. While the ninja-to, shuriken, blowgun, and tsubate are the most common ninja weapons, other tools have sometimes been found at the site of supposed ninja attacks. Whether real weapons or just ways to confuse magistrates, here are a few of the most exotic examples:

BAKUHATSU-GAMA: A chain weapon similar to the kusari-gama, this one replaces the weight opposite the blade with a small clay receptacle made to explode on contact, spreading a poison or some form of powder.

MAMUKI-GAMA: Another chain weapon similar to the kusari-gama, except that near the weight is attached a live venomous snake. Considered an outlandish rumor by most magistrates, some still believe it explains some of the stranger cases of death by snake bite.

NEKO-TE: Small needles which are attached to fingertips, these do very little damage but can be used to discreetly poison someone. A talented ninja could potentially even inject a poison in a wakeful victim without being noticed.

SHINOBI-SHUKO: The climbing claws of the ninja, they can also be used to great effect in a fight, supplementing jujitsu techniques. When used on the feet rather than the hands they are known as *shinobi-ashiko*.



Scorpion were never again able to locate the same pass, leading many of them to dismiss the young survivor's story. Curiouser still, the Lion denied any knowledge of a samurai fitting the description, of an army in the Seikitsu, or of the pass itself. The only thing that prevented the Scorpion warrior's story from being completely dismissed was that his legion had truly disappeared; their bodies were never found.



THE BATTLEFIELD OF SHALLOW GRAVES

The Clan War was a time filled with battles large and small, and probably as many fights were forgotten as were recorded in the archives of the Imperial Histories. One particularly odd battle started as a simple clash between forces of the Dragon Clan and the Crab Clan, the latter accompanied by their sinister allies from the Shadowlands. However, both sides soon realized something bizarre was afoot, as the spirits of the dead began returning to the battlefield and attacking both sides indiscriminately. Things looked dire for both sides until the commanders of the Crab and Dragon somehow agreed to broker a brief alliance. They stood side by side to fight against the spirits, and while the cost was high the dead were eventually defeated. The two forces parted without further bloodshed, both having been reduced to a fraction of their initial strength.

After the war, the Dragon attempted to identify the site of the battle, but there were only few survivors and their reports contradicted each other. The Crab refused to cooperate on the topic, possibly due to a reluctance to revisit their shameful alliance with the Shadowlands. The battle continued to worry Dragon scholars for years, for they suspected it indicated an extremely weak point in the barrier separating Ningen-Do from Toshigoku. However, they were never able to fully investigate the issue due to the lack of evidence.

THE GHOSTS OF PESHKAYA

Rokugani scholars have sometimes wondered if gaijin can leave ghosts behind after their deaths; after all, ghosts are wandering souls, and from the Rokugani point of view the gaijin do not have souls. However, during Rokugan's expansion into the Colonies in the late twelfth century, an incident occurred which suggested gaijin ghosts might indeed be a possibility.

The Spider Clan, sent to pacify the lands of the former Ivory Kingdoms, often encountered strange spirits and unnatural creatures in the ruins of the Ivinda culture. On one particularly infamous occasion, a large detachment of Spider troops entered a ruined city called Peshkaya, presumed to be a regional capital of sorts. Not only did ghosts appear there, but they arranged themselves in order of battle, seemingly still wishing to defend their city. The Spider commander was all too happy to oblige, and after a ferocious battle conquered the city. This was followed by a minor scandal, however, as Mantis explorers later found no trace of spiritual activity when visiting the ruined city. They posited that the spiritual army had only appeared to defend it from the malevolent influence of the Spider. The Spider, however, claimed they had simply destroyed the spirits permanently, and since the ruins never troubled anyone again, the point was eventually dropped.

Fortunes on the Battlefield

At the dawn of the Empire, gods walked the earth alongside mortals. Hida, Akodo, and Hantei were warriors without peer, and their fights were legendary. It is said when Akodo faced Hantei in the final duel to determine who would rule the Empire, the strikes of their blades shaped the land around them, cutting mountains down and opening the way for new rivers. While some in Rokugan would later take these stories as artistic representations of how the two mighty Kami faced each other, even they must admit that sometimes the gods take an interest in the mortal realm... and when they do, the consequences are always of epic proportions. The dawn of the Empire was not the last time this happened; not only did some of the Kami remain in Rokugan for a hundred years and more, but Togashi lived in Rokugan for over eleven centuries, and both Shinjo and Fu Leng returned to the mortal world in the twelfth century. However, other legends exist of the Fortunes themselves taking part in the course of battles in the mortal world. Sometimes this is an indirect act, such as when Osano-Wo struck the gates of Kyuden Isawa while his son Kaimetsu-Uo assaulted them. Two more examples of such legends are given below, and can serve as a template for similar stories to be used in a campaign if the GM thinks it suitable.

OSANO-WO AND BISHAMON

While few battles have occurred between the Crab and the Lion, whose lands are well distant from each other, the political vagaries of Rokugan are such that it has occasionally happened. On one specific occasion, a legion of Crab soldiers was allowed through Scorpion lands to reach Lion territory, where they faced a legion of Lion soldiers over a blood feud started at Winter Court that year. Some say Osano-Wo's name had been besmirched in court, while others claim a particularly pious and powerful shugenja of the Kuni family managed to attract

Osano-Wo's attention through his prayers. Whatever the reason, the Fortune of Fire and Thunder manifested on the side of the Crab soldiers and joined the battle, his incredible strength crushing Lion samurai like insects. It is said the commander of the Lion Clan army, disgusted with the advantage the Crab had obtained, prayed for Bishamon to intervene... and the Fortune of Strength answered by manifesting on the Lion side. What had started as a simple battle now had two gods involved, and they soon faced each other directly, the ground below them shaking and the sky above erupting in a ferocious storm. Many soldiers lost their lives as the fight between the two Fortunes grew more intense with each passing moment. The end result of their duel was never known, for the few survivors of both sides retreated lest they lose their lives as well. Needless to say, the blood feud was never mentioned in court again.

MICHIO AND GOEMON

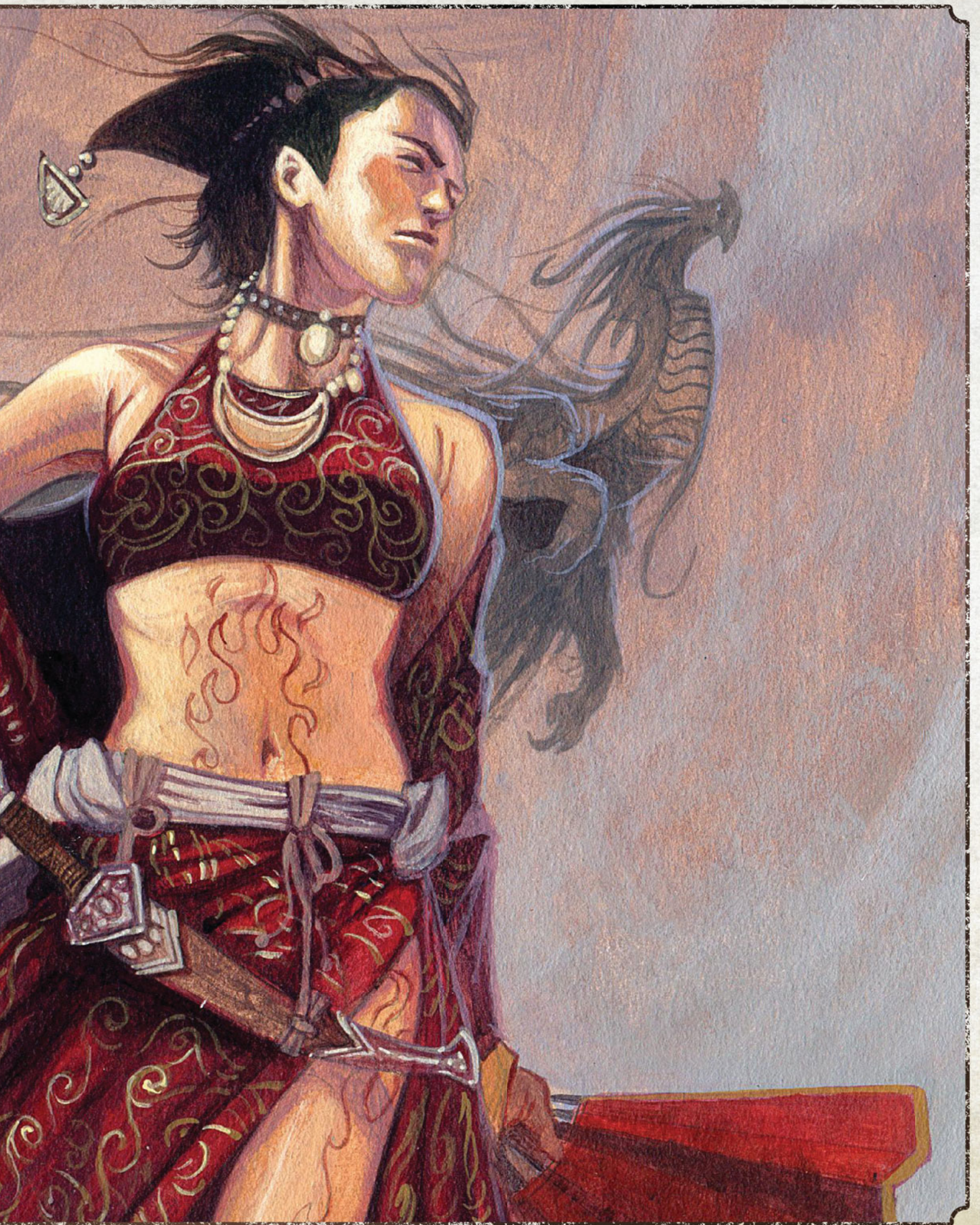
Sometimes mortals are the ones who fight the gods – and as Fu Leng himself learned all too well, the gods can lose. After the Destroyer War, Rokugan was in tatters and many terrible creatures, ruthless bandits, and scattered groups of gaijin roamed the land. Michio, the formidable warrior monk who led the heretical Order of the Spider,

decided to roam the Empire by himself, destroying any of its enemies he encountered. (Of course, he also faced additional enemies from the ranks of those samurai who saw the existence of the Spider Clan as an offense, and he defeated those as well.) His exploits against monsters and bandits earned him a reputation with the lower classes, much to his disgust – he saw adoration as proof of weakness. One day, as villagers approached him with the intention of celebrating him as a hero, Michio expressed his disgust with the very concept of heroism – a statement which attracted the attention of Goemon, Fortune of Heroes. The Fortune manifested and the two fought each other, the violence of their bare-handed blows so intense that three of the villagers died from the shockwaves. Michio eventually delivered a blow that killed Goemon (or at least slew the Fortune's avatar), but quickly died of his own wounds as well.

This story was dismissed as a lie across most of the Empire, particularly since the only surviving witness was a peasant who was blinded by the force of Michio's killing blow and who joined the Order of the Spider after the events. However, many Spider believe the tale to be true, and have challenged anyone to find a true manifestation of Goemon in the Empire since that day. The other Fortunes have been silent on the topic.









THE VOID OF MAGIC

Hida Chikashi glared at the man standing across the room. Tea, polite conversation, all the niceties normally afforded a guest were instantly forgotten. He considered just ejecting the man from his home — by force, if necessary. But bodily tossing an Isawa shugenja, an Inquisitor, into the dirt would be a terrible breach of etiquette, dishonoring him and his family. So he just said: “That is my son you’re talking about.”

The Isawa, who claimed his name was Yusei, nodded. “I realize this is difficult for you to hear—”

“My son is not...” He stopped, shaking his head.

“I am truly sorry, Hida-sama,” the Isawa said. “But I’ve been... let’s call it watching him. For some time now. He must be dealt with, and quickly.”

“I will not lose my son.”

“I’m afraid you already have.”

Hida Daitaro limped away from the dojo. Tears stung his eyes, but he kept his gaze ahead, on nothing.

Pain blossomed in his arm and shoulder, low on his hip, all the places where his opponent’s tetsubo had slammed into him. The tears were not because of the pain. Pain he could live with. It was the shame, the frustration... the failure.

He had never won a bout in the dojo. Never. He could not focus. His concentration always faltered, opening gaps, letting his opponents’ strikes through, every time.

He reached a bend in the road from the dojo to Smooth Rock Village. He could see his house ahead. His father

would be there. Hida Chikashi, a great warrior, a legend, a man who had returned from the Shadowlands with the head of an oni for his gempukku. Daitaro would hobble into the house, and disappointment would darken his father’s face once again, and Daitaro would wish to die.

Wiping his eyes, Daitaro limped to the stump of a cedar tree and sat down. Birds sang in the other trees around him, insects buzzed, a dog barked somewhere in the distance. But it all seemed so... unreal, so disconnected...

“So there you are.”

Daitaro turned. Hida Tarou stood on the road, a pair of padded tetsubo dangling from his hands. Students from the dojo crowded behind him.

Daitaro blinked. “What do you want?”

“I’m going to teach you how to fight.”

“I know how to fight. I just—”

“No, you don’t,” Tarou interrupted. “You wield the tetsubo like some perfumed Doji fluttering a fan.” The bigger boy scowled. “Someday you will stand in a Crab battle line. Those fighting at your side will depend on you holding your place. But you will fail, and the line will break.” He waved one of the tetsubo at Daitaro. “Now take this and assume your stance. You will learn to fight, here and now.”

Daitaro did not move. The feeling of unreality, of being disconnected from everything, even from Tarou, only intensified. Finally he shook his head. “Tomorrow, in the dojo, we can—”

“No. Now.”



"But—"

Tarou threw the tetsubo at Daitaro. It clattered against the cedar stump. Raising the other weapon, he advanced. "Take your stance," he snarled. "Or don't. I don't care. One way or the other, you will learn to fight... or you won't, and then you'll be an invalid. Either way, you will not fail the Crab."

Daitaro looked at the fallen tetsubo. It suddenly loomed in his vision, every scratch, every fleck of dirt magnified, suddenly and momentarily important. He dragged his gaze away—

—in time to see Tarou's tetsubo descending in a blur.

He should dodge, grab for his own weapon, do something. But he did nothing, and then pain blasted through his already-hurt shoulder like an Agasha firework. Daitaro cried out—

—and reality exploded, rushing away, leaving Daitaro lost in an infinite emptiness. And then it imploded, crushing itself down to a point and him with it. Daitaro's cry of pain continued, rising, becoming a howl, then a rush of noise that was suddenly every noise, was everything, everywhere...

...a water bug sculling across a shadowed pool in the Shinomen Mori...

...a peasant digging in the mud beneath the walls of Shiro Moto...

...an eagle soaring over mountains wreathed in sunlit mist...

...a samurai drawing his katana in an iaijutsu strike that was an instant too slow...

...an ancient tree leaning over the River of Gold, its roots washed by muddy water...

...everything...

...EVERYTHING...

Hida Daitaro screamed, and screamed, and screamed.

"Daitaro-kun!"

Daitaro saw nothing, saw everything, saw things that had happened, that would happen, that could happen...

...and then saw a man. He stood like a sturdy rock amid the roaring cascade of reality turning into inconstant liquid. Daitaro wanted to speak to the man, but all he could do was scream.

"Daitaro-kun," the man called, "take my hand!"

Daitaro looked at the hand offered to him. It was right there, as immutable as rock... but at the same time it was vastly far away. He reached for it, or wanted to... but his hand did not move, or maybe it did but it moved everywhere, touched everything...

"Your hand," the man said, his voice loud but controlled. "Concentrate on your hand, nothing else. Put it into mine."

Daitaro tried. But his hand was all things, and moving it was moving the world.

"Your hand, Daitaro-kun. It is all that matters."

Daitaro concentrated on the voice, on his hand, moving it, moving the world with it, and finally touched the hand offered to him—

Reality crashed back into itself. Hida Daitaro lay across a stump, the warm tang of cedar filling the air. A man in the orange robes of the Phoenix knelt over him. Daitaro recognized him as the man who had brought him back from... wherever he had gone.

"Daitaro-kun," the man said calmly, "can you hear me?"

Daitaro lifted his head. He felt as though he had just crawled from deep water, but he made himself nod. He saw others around him. Other boys, students from the dojo, and his father with his face set in a grim frown. And kneeling nearby, Hida Tarou. A padded tetsubo rested on the ground beside him, his hand still gripping it. But his face was blank, his eyes empty and unfocused, his mouth hanging slack.

Daitaro looked past the Phoenix, at his father. "I... don't know what happened..."

His father shook his head. "Neither do I. But this man, Isawa Yusei, is an ishiken of the Phoenix Clan, and he does."

"You entered the Void," Isawa Yusei said. "In doing so, you exposed this young man," he gestured at Tarou, "to the Void as well. It has damaged his mind. He may recover, but he may not." Yusei looked at Daitaro's father. "Now, do you see? This will happen again. And next time, it may affect many. It could have this time, if I hadn't been here to stop it."

Daitaro looked from his father to the Isawa as he spoke. "Father, I don't understand—"

"No," Hida Chikashi replied, and his face softened. "And neither do I. And that is why you must go with Isawa Yusei-sama."

"Go with him? Where? And for how long?"

The sadness on his father's face answered the question.



The Nature of the Void

"Predict the Void and it will change, if only to defy your prediction."
— Agasha Shaku

Among the Elements, Void is an enigma. While it is still considered an "Element" by Rokugani scholars, the Void is entirely unlike the other four. Earth, Air, Fire, and Water are all characterized by several key attributes: they have substance, they take up space, and they are readily discerned by all humans, not just those attuned to the kami. They have predictable properties – Fire is hot and gives off light; Water is wet and flows downhill; Earth is solid and (left to its own devices) unyielding; Air is felt as wind and breath. This is true even if they occur in different forms; for example, water may freeze and become ice, but it is still fundamentally water. And for those who are capable of communing with and importuning them, the kami of these four Elements are just as predictable in their behavior as are the physical Elements themselves.

None of these things are true for the Void.

Void has no fixed properties and is inherently unpredictable. To the extent that it is understood by shugenja (even the *ishiken*, those rare shugenja who are most attuned to the Void) it is seen as fundamentally paradoxical. Void reflects all things, so it also reflects the properties of all things, even if those things are contradictory. Void is vast, but it is also without dimensions. It is timeless, but it also exists in a single instant. It extends everywhere, but exists nowhere. It is the embodiment of inconstancy and change, but it is also utterly unchanging. It is, in short, all things... and none of them.

Thus, it may seem that the Void is impossible to understand, defying any rational attempt to describe it, quantify it, or specify its nature. This is certainly true for most Rokugani. Even shugenja blessed with the ability to perceive and commune with the kami of the other Elements often fail to have any true understanding of Void. To them it is a background, like the night sky to someone studying the stars – it is there, and it is important in the sense that it gives context and meaning to the stars, defining their positions and movements relative to one another. On its own, however, the night sky between the stars is simply empty space, without any particular shape or meaning. So, too, for most shugenja the Void simply gives meaning and context to the other Elements, shaping them and giving them unique identity as the things that make up the world.

Elemental Void

"There are no secrets. There is no understanding. Void is all and nothing. It is the dance of the elements."

— The Tao of Shinsei

So what is Void? As suggested above, there is no easy answer to this question. Unlike Earth, Air, Fire, or Water, there is no substance to describe, no particular properties to ascribe. Most Rokugani accept Void as a deep mystery, something that straddles the boundaries between the stuff that makes up the world, and the realms of human thought, emotion, and spirituality. Shugenja have somewhat more insight, being able to perceive Void as that which binds the other Elements together, giving things shape and identity. Even this, however, is incomplete, barely scratching the proverbial surface of what Void actually is. Only a few individuals, most notably the *ishiken*, have managed to formulate a deeper and more complete understanding of Elemental Void. Their insights are described in more detail below, but in summary: Void is the totality of all things. Everything that has ever existed, does exist, or will exist, is reflected in the Void. To that extent, Void indeed gives shape and identity to all things in the world. It is much more, however. Void also encompasses all things that will be thought or considered; it reflects not only what was, is, and will be, but also what things could have been. Even though it is fundamentally nothing in itself, Void incorporates all things. It is this paradoxical nature that is at the core of understanding Void... to the extent that any human mind could truly understand such an apparent contradiction. Nonetheless, it may very well be this understanding that forms the foundation of that most elusive of all things: Enlightenment.





There is, however, one way in which Void is like the other Elements. It must be in a state of balance in order for an object to be “normal” or “healthy.” The exact meaning of the term “balance” differs when it comes to Void, however. A piece of paper whose Elemental Fire is in a proper state of balance is unremarkable. If it has too much Fire, it becomes brittle, discolours, may begin to char and smolder, and may even spontaneously burst into flames. A man with too little Elemental Air, the Element most closely associated with emotion, will be listless, unenthused, and depressed. Too much Water in a piece of rock will leave it friable, perhaps even crumbling to gravel. The state of Elemental balance, when it comes to the non-Void Elements, is about a proper proportion of each with respect to the others. There is a “correct” proportion of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water in each thing, and this balance (or any imbalance) is important to understanding the role that Element plays in that thing.

Void, however, is different. While there is a “correct” amount of Void for each thing, this is not relative to the other Elements; Void must only be “correct” with respect to itself. If Void is out of “balance,” it is not a case of there being too little or too much; instead, the fundamental nature of the thing or being is changed. Powerful shugenja are able to alter something or someone’s Void, as are various other potent spiritual beings, or exposure (deliberate or inadvertent) to the essence of the Void itself. It is also possible that changing the nature or balance of Void in an object is implicit in certain other phenomena, such as certain powerful effects of Nezumi Name magic and the influence of the Lying Darkness. This may speak to more subtle connections between the Void and other things in the world, which may themselves be glimpses of a profound truth underlying all of existence.

The Ways of Void Magic

“Have you ever had a moment when everything made sense? Your heart and mind, perfectly attuned to yourself and your surroundings? That is what it is like to be in tune with the Void. To... understand.”

— Isawa Kimi, Master of Void

Shugenja, the practitioners of magic in Rokugan, recognize the Elements and the importance of their relative balance in all things. This is because they have an innate understanding and connection with the Elemental kami, the semi-sentient spiritual beings that both embody and reflect the essences of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. However, there are no Void kami. Rather, the Void itself is semi-sentient, incorporating the collective consciousness of all things. Accordingly, Void shugenja stand apart from their counterparts in the same way Void itself stands apart from the other Elements. In fact, the gulf that separates Void shugenja from other shugenja may be as wide, or even wider, as that separating shugenja generally from other mortals. This makes Void shugenja fundamentally different from all people, a view which seems to be borne out by those few individuals who have developed a facility for interacting with the Void. Each individual Void shugenja is as different from other Void shugenja as he or she is from other mortals, such is the peculiar and particular communion each has with this enigmatic Element.

One basic fact regarding Void shugenja in Rokugan does stand clear, however: the vast majority of such shugenja are found in the Isawa family of the Phoenix Clan. They are known as *ishi* – or *ishiken*, if they are true masters of Void magic. Most of them are born into the Phoenix Clan. However, the *ishiken*, both individually and as a group, strive to maintain a careful awareness of all others in Rokugan who are born with an attunement with the Void, irrespective of clan or other affiliations. Because unconstrained communion with the Void can have dire consequences, the *ishiken* move quickly to bring such individuals under the firm guidance of the Phoenix, or at least to prevent them from becoming a danger to themselves, others, and the world around them. The measures used are sometimes quite severe, but the *ishi* are only all too aware of the potential damage from unguided and undisciplined interaction with the Elemental Void.

Aside from the *ishi* of the Isawa, a few very rare individuals, such as certain monks and mystic orders (mainly of the Phoenix and Dragon Clans), may discern the Void, though in ways distinct from the perceptions of Void shugenja. Such monks are recognized by the *ishi* and generally left alone, their monastic orders giving structure and control to their talents. However, there have been other instances of





Void adepts existing and even thriving in Rokugan. Some have escaped the notice of the Phoenix *ishi*, others have thwarted the efforts of the *ishi* to bring them under their control, and a few transcended those efforts entirely. Void shugenja who are not born or brought into the Phoenix Clan typically become ronin, itinerant wanderers in the Empire, often reduced to madmen by their undisciplined communion with the Void. There have been some notable exceptions, however, most famously in the Asahina family of the Crane Clan and the Tamori family of the Dragon. Adepts of Elemental Void are also occasionally found among the Kitsu family of the Lion Clan, as a result of the deep connection that family maintains to the spirit realms. Finally, in the twelfth century a supremely secretive group in the Scorpion Clan, devoted to understanding and defeating the Nothing, achieves some modest skill with Void magic as well.

The Isawa Family of the Phoenix Clan

Philosophically, the Isawa are pacifists who spurn violence in favor of other means of settling conflicts. However, the Isawa will reluctantly put aside their pacifism if they believe the result will serve a greater good. The powerful Tensai – shugenja who focus on a particular Element – can call on both the creative and the destructive powers of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water at need. On a larger scale, the Phoenix maintain the Elemental Guard, a force of four Elemental Legions devoted to the four individual Elements. The names of each Legion – the Firestorm Legion, the Avalanche Guard, the Hurricane Initiates, and the Tsunami Legion – are well known in the Empire. However, true to the mysterious nature of the Void, there is no Elemental Legion of Void. Rather, a small and generally unknown cadre of *ishi* known only as the Void Guard exists, applying Void magic during war... and also guarding against the unrestrained use of Void magic during such chaotic times. The Void Guard has no fixed organization and, unlike the other Elemental Legions, does not even exist outside of wartime. Rather, any and all *ishi* are expected to take up duties as members of the Void Guard when they are needed. Nor does the Void Guard undergo any sort of formal mustering; its members simply become aware of the need to constitute the Guard, as well as of when it is no longer needed. Such insights are not unusual among adepts of Void, after all.

Apart from the Void Guard, the *ishi* have no fixed organization. There is a “school” of Void magic, but unlike the other Elemental schools it is not a formal institution. If anyone were to go looking for a physical place called a “school of Elemental Void,” they would search in vain. Instead, the Void school is essentially a social gathering of Void shugenja for the purpose of training neophytes in their ways. Masters – usually *ishiken* or senior and particularly accomplished *ishi* – fill the roles of sensei, but usually only teach a single student each. Master and pupil will live, study, and work alone, frequently wandering Phoenix lands or even more widely across Rokugan,

only coming together in larger groups when it seems advantageous or necessary. Accordingly, Void shugenja are often itinerant, found throughout the Empire, despite their Phoenix loyalty. In Phoenix lands, it is also common to find *ishi* (and their pupils if they have them) visiting other Elemental schools or the clan’s great libraries, such as the one at Kyuden Isawa.

Ishi are often named as Tensai, focused practitioners of Void magic. The truth is somewhat more complex, however. While it is true that *ishi* generally maintain a primary focus on the Void, this is more because of the extreme difficulty, effort, and concentration required by the discipline than any actual choice. Moreover, their connection to the Void also gives *ishi* deep insights into the other Elements, so most are quite capable of using the other four types of magic even if they only rarely do so.

INITIATION OF AN ISHI

Even as they go about their other business, the more accomplished *ishi* and the masters known as *ishiken* continually “listen” to the Void for hints that a child has been born who is attuned to it. The echoes of such a birth are usually clear; what is less clear is what to do about it. The *ishi* will usually take counsel with each other, evaluating the nature of the child and its connection to the Void. Often this connection is tenuous. Such a child may be given to vivid dreams, a slight disconnection from the world around him, or an especially fertile imagination, but little more. Other children may simply share karmic ties to other individuals with greater connections to the Void, but possess no particular connection to the Void themselves. Such individuals are usually allowed to grow and live without any intervention by the *ishi*, although they may be monitored if some latent greater power is suspected.

If the *ishi* determine their involvement with the child is warranted, further decisions must be made. The nature of the child, his family, his place in the Empire, his bloodlines, the apparent strength of the connection to the Void, and a host of other factors must be considered. The *ishi* may decide the best course of action is to simply continue keeping watch. Alternatively, they may choose to erect mystical wards and protections to contain the child’s talent or even to weaken or suppress the child’s attunement to the Void. In extreme cases, and with great reluctance, the *ishi* may conclude the only safe course of action is to have the child put to death. This is an absolute last resort, and only used in cases where the child’s talent is so unconstrained and fraught with dangerous potential that no other approach is likely to work.

Should the *ishi* decide that none of these measures are necessary or appropriate, they may proceed to induct the child as an initiate. This will normally be done once the child is at least five years old, but no more than ten. Experience has shown that an early attunement to the Void will sometimes fade before the fifth year; however, allowing a talent to develop past the tenth year without guidance and discipline is simply too dangerous. Children with untrained talent will likely not understand why



they experience the world so differently, and may be irrevocably damaged physically, mentally, and spiritually. The *ishi* will choose one of their number to visit the child's family and explain the nature of their unique gift. They will particularly emphasize the importance of having the child properly guided and trained to avoid a loss of control that might cause harm.

Should the child's family balk at having their son or daughter taken away, the *ishi* face a choice... for while custom is on their side, they lack specific Imperial sanction to enforce their wishes. Accordingly, if the family is of relatively low status or otherwise lacks political clout, the *ishi* may simply force the issue. They may appeal to more senior members of the clan in question, or to the Jade or Emerald Magistrates, or in urgent situations they may act directly to take the child into their own custody. But if the family is well-connected or otherwise powerful, the *ishi* may be forced to seek the approval of higher authorities such as family daimyo or Clan Champions... or if they feel truly justified, they may risk conflict by taking it on themselves to seize the child. If they choose the latter, they will seek support from senior members of the Phoenix Clan, such as the Elemental Master of Void or even the entire Elemental Council.

Whatever the case, the *ishi* are extremely unlikely to simply allow an untrained Void talent to remain at large in the Empire.

APPRENTICESHIP

Once a child with Void talent is taken in as an apprentice (by whatever means), he or she will be assigned an *ishi* as a teacher. (It may be noted that technically the child is also an *ishi* at this point; the term "apprentice" is used for the sake of clarity.) The relationship between *ishi* and apprentice is often more like parent and child than teacher and student, and a close bond usually develops between them. The *ishi* becomes the apprentice's anchor in reality, providing him a firm base from which to explore the Void. *Ishi* and apprentice will generally remain apart from the outside world as much as possible, living in remote places and often adopting a hermetic existence. The only people the apprentice is allowed to meet during this time are other *ishi* and (on rare occasions) his own

family — and then only for brief periods. The focus is on giving the apprentice the knowledge and skills necessary to understand, appreciate, and harness his gift. His master will often erect buffers and wards to shield the apprentice from the full impact of the Void, lowering them slowly and incrementally as the apprentice becomes more skillful and confident with his powers.

The duration of a Void apprenticeship is highly variable. For some students it takes only a few years before they are able to interact with the Void with full confidence and control. For others, however, an apprenticeship may last decades. Some never fully realize their abilities and are only able to perceive and interact with the Void in a limited way through the barriers erected around them for their own safety. Such individuals become acolytes, assisting *ishi* in the more minor aspects of their duties. And a few prove wholly unable to master their talent, in which case they are sent to remote monasteries where they live out their days in harmless obscurity. It is rumored that a few apprentices have proven so difficult to control that more extreme measures were necessary, but the *ishi* do not speak of such dire outcomes.

The Isawa recognize several stages of achievement in understanding and interacting with the Void. While these are sometimes referred to as "Rings" by those who do not truly understand them, the correct term is *beru* ("bell"). The ringing of a chime or bell is a sudden burst of clear sound followed by a long tone that fades into the background. Similarly, an *ishi's* new understanding of the Way of Void is a moment of insight followed by gradually incorporating that understanding into his view of the world until it is simply another part of a seamless whole. However, despite this clever description, these *beru* are not actually clearly-defined bodies of knowledge achieved in some specific way; the Void, and the people who interact with it, are far more chaotic and complex than that. Rather, this is a means of offering a general understanding of the Way of Void that accommodates the limits of the human mind.

Beru Saishome – The first "bell" is considered to have rung when the *ishi* believes the apprentice is ready to fully experience the Void for the first time. This may not occur for several years after the apprenticeship begins; the intervening time is spent ensuring the *ishi's* charge has an understanding of the ways of the real world, from attending to his own basic needs to the essential functions and interactions of the natural realm and the world of man — for example, the relationship between hunter and prey, the turning of the seasons, the nature of birth, life, and death, and so on. Once the *ishi* is confident the apprentice has a healthy and complete understanding of the world around him, he will begin to weaken or even remove the barriers that have kept the apprentice apart from the Void. This first interaction with Void is tentative; the *ishi* monitors the apprentice closely as he takes his first halting steps in the unseen world. The *ishi* may recall his apprentice at any time, reeling him back into reality as though pulling him from dangerous waters with a rope. At this level, a successful apprentice is able to perceive the Void but as yet has little ability to influence it.



Beru Daimome – The second “bell” represents the apprentice having his first opportunity to truly interact with the Void. The *ishi* allows his charge to wander more freely in the Void, gaining understanding about the interconnectedness of all things. For instance, he will begin to understand that the Elemental Water in his own body is the same as that in a tree, or the ocean, or the clouds overhead. Moreover, he will begin to appreciate the Void for what it truly is – like the blank paper surrounding the brush strokes of a letter, he will see it defines everything as much by what it is as what it is not, by its presence as much as its absence. Most importantly, the apprentice will have his first chance to influence the Void, making subtle alterations in reality – but again, only under the watchful and wary supervision of the *ishi* master.

Beru Sanbanme – The third “bell” is struck when the apprentice finally sees the real world for what it is: a construct of fundamental Elements tied into form, substance, and purpose by the Void. He realizes that everything he can see, touch, hear, taste, and feel is merely a mask over something both more abstract and more basic. Earth, Air, Fire, and Water are what lie beneath the mask, and the mask itself is the Void, giving all shape and identity. At this point the apprentice can truly begin to manipulate the world of the seen by manipulating that of the unseen. Concepts such as distance and time become mutable. While he is still considered an apprentice, still in need of the firm anchor of his *ishi* master to survive the experience of the Void unscathed, he is now on the verge of the next level of achievement when his apprenticeship will be at an end.

ISHIKA (COMPREHENSION) AND MASTERY

The end to the time of apprenticeship is known as *ishika* (“comprehension”). For some, *ishika* occurs gradually, like the petals of a flower opening in the sun; for others, it is a sudden enlightenment, revealed all at once. In any case, when the apprentice experiences *ishika*, he understands the Void is more than just a realm beyond that which is seen, more than just the “mask” giving shape to the raw Elements that comprise all things. He realizes the “real” world and the Void are actually one in the same, and that all things – the distant mountains, the nearby river, the dirt and grass under his feet, even himself – are parts of a single whole. They are all of these things and all of these things are them. *Ishika* is the point at which the apprentice has become a true *ishi* in his own right. He has achieved *beru yonbanme*, the fourth “bell” to be rung on the Way of Void. He is now poised to become an *ishiken*, a true adept of the Void.

The most learned and accomplished of the *ishiken* may even ascend to become the Elemental Master of Void. This individual, a member of the Phoenix Clan’s Elemental Council, is the most powerful Void shugenja – and thus perhaps the most powerful of all shugenja – in Rokugan.

BEYOND MASTERY

For most Void shugenja, *beru yonbanme* is the pinnacle of achievement. Having achieved *ishika*, they now venture into the world as skilled practitioners of the Way of Void. Only a very few even recognize, much less achieve, the final degree of understanding: *beru gonbanme*, the fifth “bell.”

For those who have not achieved it, *beru gonbanme* is almost impossible to truly understand. To these powerful adepts of Void, concepts such as time and distance are essentially meaningless. There are able to experience many things – some even say all things – at once. To one who has achieved *beru gonbanme*, the defeat of Fu Leng on the First Day of Thunder, the death of a farmer who was run over by an ox cart in the Scorpion provinces during the reign of Hantei XIV, and the birth of a clutch of spiders from an egg sac in the gardens of the Crane sometime in the future are all the same thing in time and space. Each is simply a different expression of an underlying truth, a foundation of existence so fundamental that it may be the essential bedrock of reality. Some speculate that those who have achieved *beru gonbanme* may have begun a path that will lead them to true Enlightenment; others suggest they have glimpsed the universal truth that ultimately unites the apparently disparate understanding of all races that have ever existed. The Name magic of the Nezumi, the collective existence of the Naga called the Akasha, the crude shamanism of the Yobanjin, and the enigmatic practices of each of the so-called Five Ancient Races may simply be other manifestations of the core nature of reality. Such musings border on blasphemy and are usually quickly suppressed by the Isawa. In any case, only those who have achieved *beru gonbanme* know the truth and they do not share it.

What is indisputably true about those who have achieved *beru gonbanme* is that they are powerful almost beyond comprehension. These more-than-Masters are so proficient at manipulating the Void that they can wholly change or even unmake parts of reality, including the beings who inhabit it. The price, however, can be terribly high; the human mind and spirit is often too frail a vessel to contain or channel such power. Death is not the issue; to one so deeply enmeshed in the Void, the cessation of life is a trivial thing. Rather, such individuals may simply cease to exist in any sense meaningful to mortals, literally becoming a part of the Void and thus of all things in the world. Whether this is what constitutes true Enlightenment remains a matter of debate among the Isawa *ishi*.





The Other Families of the Phoenix Clan

Although the largest number of Void shugenja are Isawa, some Void shugenja are also found among the ranks of the Asako family and even – very rarely – the Shiba family. The Agasha family also occasionally gives rise to *ishi*, both before and after the events of the Hidden Emperor era. Some of these *ishi* are actually Isawa by birth who married into the other families and assumed their names. However, there are also some who are born into these other families and are nonetheless attuned to the Void.

THE ASAKO FAMILY

Asako was one of the first human followers of the Kami Shiba, and later became the founder of the mystical *henshin* order. The *henshin* follow the Path of Man, a secret which they believe will one day guide all of humanity to a divine state. Using strange invocations known as Riddles, the *henshin* are able to manipulate the Elemental universe around them. However, this is not true “magic” as it is understood by the Isawa and other conventional Rokugani shugenja. The *henshin* are certainly able to achieve Elemental affects of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, but they do so by interacting with these Elements directly, not by invoking their kami. The exact mechanism for this – the Riddles themselves – are a closely guarded secret.

Those who understand the Path of Man know that a series of so-called Mysteries define the four Elements, with a corresponding Riddle tied to each Mystery. It is not clear, however, that there is a corresponding Mystery for Void. The Fifth Mystery is called the Mystery of Fate, and is only understood by those most accomplished in the ways of the *henshin*: the enigmatic masters known as Fushihai. There have been references in scholarly literature to a Riddle of Void, but it is by no means certain this actually exists, and it may simply be another name for the Mystery of Fate. The Fushihai themselves believe that Void and Fate are intimately connected, so much so that they may be one and the same. This would accord with the idea that the Void is all things that have been, are, or ever will be. The Mystery of Fate and its associated Riddle may be the means by which the *henshin* manipulate Void, even if they do not recognize it as such.

The implication of this is profound. It would suggest that the Void talent of the *ishi* is not the only means by which mortals may interact with the Void – that there is another way, embedded within the Path of Man. More significantly, this way may not require a particular attunement to the Void, but may instead be something that could be taught to anyone with the (admittedly considerable) mental discipline to learn it. However, the Fushihai are extraordinarily secretive and selective on who they will bring into their deepest Mystery, so for the time being this means of accessing the Void is available only to a very few.

Aside from the secrets of the *henshin*, a facility with Void magic does occur among the Asako more generally. This gift of the bloodline is likely born from Asako herself, perhaps because of her own attunement to the Void, perhaps as some by-product of her association with Shiba and Isawa, or perhaps even due to her exposure to the secrets of the Path of Man. Asako children born with a connection to the Void are sought out by the Isawa *ishi* as are any other such children. However, it is customary among the Phoenix to allow such Void adepts to remain within the Asako family if they choose, rather than requiring them to join the Isawa family.

THE AGASHA FAMILY

The Agasha are not originally a Phoenix family, and in fact for most of their history were the shugenja family of the Dragon Clan. However, during the Hidden Emperor era the majority of the Agasha fled the mad reign of Mirumoto Hitomi; the Phoenix, having suffered many casualties in the preceding era of the Clan Wars, readily took in the Agasha refugees and they became a new family in the clan of their benefactors.

Regarding the Void, the Agasha are an enigma. Unlike the Asako or even the Shiba, there is no blood relationship between them and the Isawa, nor is there any mystical connection to the Kami Shiba. Nonetheless, Void adepts have very occasionally been born into the Agasha, both before and after their departure from the Dragon Clan. A particularly notable such individual is Agasha Seruma, one of very few *ishi* born in the Empire during the mid-twelfth century. In fact, prior to her birth, the only known *ishi* was another non-Isawa, Shiba Ningen. Both Seruma and Ningen went on to become powerful *ishiken* during a two-generation span when there were none born even among the Isawa. (The significance of this, if any, is not known.)

Isawa *ishi* and Void scholars speculate that there was some specific connection between the Void and the lady Agasha, the mortal follower of the Kami Togashi and the founder of the Agasha family. The nature of this connection, whatever it might be, is lost to time; the best speculation is that Agasha's close association with Togashi may have imparted some attunement to the Void that has persisted through her bloodline into the modern Agasha and their offshoot the Tamori family (see below). In any case, the Isawa make little attempt to hide their satisfaction over the Agasha joining their clan, since this places another source of powerful Void shugenja under their watchful eyes and influence.

THE SHIBA FAMILY

The Shiba are a study in contradictions. While the family was founded by the Kami Shiba, it is not the leading family of the clan, and where the Phoenix are first and foremost a clan of scholars and shugenja, the Shiba are predominantly warriors, militants in a clan of pacifists. Those with the ability to speak to the kami are occasionally born into the Shiba, sometimes resulting in

friction between them and the Isawa who must teach them. The occurrence of an *ishi* in the Shiba is unusual but not unknown; as noted previously, *ishi* are born throughout the Empire, and the Isawa are always watchful for such births. However, only one Void adept has ever been known to keep the Shiba name after his powers were discovered: Shiba Ningen, one of the most powerful *ishiken* Rokugan has ever known.

Ningen was born in the early twelfth century at the beginning of a two-generations-long era in which no *ishi* were born into the Isawa. He was a failure in his early martial training, but it soon became clear that Ningen had been touched by the Void in a particularly potent way. He trained with the Isawa and quickly became an *ishiken*. Later, when Isawa Kaede became the Oracle of Void, Ningen replaced her as Elemental Master of the Void and was subsequently involved in virtually all of the major crises affecting the Empire, from the battle against the Lying Darkness at Oblivion's Gate to the War of Dark Fire. In fact, during that conflict he made one of the most spectacular expressions of the power of Void ever seen in Rokugan, turning an entire Yobanjin army into a vast field of flowers. The effort injured him deeply, however, and he died not long thereafter.

What is unusual about Ningen is not just the extent of his connection to the Void but also the fact that his birth went unnoticed by the Isawa, his talent only becoming evident after he began his training as a Shiba bushi. Moreover, once he became an *ishi* he progressed with unparalleled quickness through the *beru*, ascending to become Master of Void only about ten years after he began his formal training. Shiba Ningen directly embodies the fact that when it comes to the Void there is no "standard," no consistent pattern; the Way of Void remains a deep mystery and no two *ishi* are ever truly alike.

The Asahina of the Crane Clan

While the Isawa of the Phoenix Clan are the shugenja most famously attuned to the Void, there are other Void practitioners in the Empire, including some who master their gifts without the assistance of the Isawa. The Asahina family of the Crane are descended from a powerful Isawa shugenja, and thus it should not be wholly surprising that *ishi* occasionally appear in their ranks. Perhaps Isawa Asahina carried within him a latent talent regarding the Void which passed down through his bloodline. In fact, two of the most famous Void practitioners of the twelfth century were both of the Asahina name. One of these was Asahina Hira, who became the Keeper of Void and whose story is discussed at the end of Chapter Four; the other was Asahina Sekawa, who became Keeper of the Five Elements.

Asahina Sekawa won the Jade Championship in the year 1158, and spent the next eight years fighting against the forces of darkness afflicting the Empire. His struggle was, at its heart, very personal – his own sister and his daimyo were both slain immediately after he won the Jade

THE ISHIKEN-DO ADVANTAGE

The Ishiken-do Advantage, given on page 151 of the Legend of the Five Rings 4th Edition Core Rulebook, is the only means by which shugenja characters are able to gain access to Void spells. It encapsulates the process described in this chapter, in which a shugenja is born as an *ishi* and subsequently trained to develop the talent. The innate talent of shugenja such as Asahina Hira of the Crane or Tamori Wotan of the Dragon, both of whom developed a facility with the Void without a long apprenticeship and training, can be represented by the GM allowing the Advantage to be purchased after Character Creation – perhaps even extending the cost reduction (from 8 Points to 6) enjoyed by Phoenix characters to include Asahina and Tamori characters, possibly even to characters from other clans who are also expressing this natural talent with Void.



Championship by one of the foul beings known as the onisu. Perhaps the greatest test of his tenure as Jade Champion came in the year 1166 when the descendant of Shinsei, the man called Rosoku, was killed by a Bloodspeaker abomination known as Shukumei. Sekawa tracked down Shukumei and defeated him in a remote monastery where he subsequently discovered Rosoku's last legacy, the Book of the Five Rings. Each of the preceding five Books had already been discovered, but the Book of Five Rings had seemed an insoluble conundrum since Rosoku's challenge stated that only he who overcame all of the other five challenges would become the Keeper of Five. How could Sekawa lay claim to the book when he had done so little?

After much soul-searching and meditation, Sekawa grasped that the solution was simple. The other challenges were meaningless in and of themselves; Enlightenment could not be sought and found, it could only be discovered. Taking up the Book, Sekawa became the Keeper of Five, a powerful master of all of Elemental magic – including Void. Thereafter Sekawa was a powerful Void shugenja as the most accomplished of Isawa *ishiken*, but his path to such mastery was obviously very unusual. It is likely he achieved *ishika* essentially all at once as a result of obtaining the form of Enlightenment offered by Rosoku's writings. Whatever the case, within a few years Sekawa retired as Jade Champion and became guardian to a young boy he believed to be Rosoku's son. He left the Empire and essentially divorced himself from Rokugani affairs, dedicating the rest of his life to protecting Shinsei's bloodline.



The Tamori of the Dragon Clan

The Tamori are the twelfth-century remnant of the Agasha family, descended from those who remained behind when most of the Agasha fled to the Phoenix. As with the Asahina, there are a few instances of Void shugenja among the Tamori. The most famous of these is Tamori Wotan, a twelfth-century shugenja with gifts in Earth and Void. Like Asahina Hira, Wotan appears to have been born with the innate ability to understand and control his attunement to the Void. Records of Wotan's lineage are scant; it is possible an ancestor of his was an Isawa or even an Asahina, or he may simply share the same distant connection to the Void as the Agasha from whom his family branched off. A more intriguing possibility is that an innate ability to control access to the Void is "at large" in the Empire, perhaps tied to some obscure blood lineage. Isawa ishi and scholars of Void have put considerable effort into attempts to track down such a lineage, but without any conclusive success.

Yet another possibility – much more disturbing to the Isawa – is that there is simply an unknown mechanism by which some Rokugani are randomly born with an affinity for the Void. What makes this problematic for the Isawa is that they appear to be unaware of such births despite the best efforts of the ishi to monitor the Void for them. The

Isawa were unaware of the births of both Asahina Hira and Tamori Wotan, only learning about them when they were adults in the full service of their respective clans and thus beyond the usual methods for "recruiting" them as Void apprentices. This raises a disquieting question – how many other such Void adepts are there in Rokugan, how many have there been throughout history? The possibility of a criminal, a subversive, or even someone who has embraced the Taint of Jigoku also being a Void shugenja as powerful as Hira or Wotan is a truly disturbing one.

The Soshi of the Scorpion Clan

The Soshi are no more or less given to exhibit Void talents among their number than any other family in the Empire. When such children are born, the Isawa ishi treat them no differently than those born into other clans. Moreover, the Scorpion Clan is no more inclined than any other clan to try to keep these children away from the Isawa; they recognize the dangers inherent in the presence of untrained Void talent in their clan, and know the best course of action for them and for the Empire is to let them to be taken as apprentices by the Phoenix.

However, in the twelfth century the deepest and most secretive recesses of the Scorpion Clan develop an unusual



and extremely dangerous connection to the Void. The Hidden Moon Dojo is described in detail in the Scorpion Clan chapter in the L5R 4th Edition supplement *The Great Clans*. The Soshi had spent a millennium studying so-called tejina (“shadow magic”) at the secret Hidden Moon Dojo, only to discover they had been manipulated all along by the Lying Darkness. After the deception was finally revealed during the Hidden Emperor era, the Hidden Moon Dojo was officially destroyed. However, in reality the Dojo assumed a new purpose: acting as the base for the covert struggle against the Nothing and its manifestations.

Part of that struggle involved the Soshi resuming their study of tejina... but in a very different way than the practices of old. Previously, the Soshi had focused on tejina as a source of power, using Shadow as a weapon, a way to travel quickly from place to place, or to remain hidden. Now, the Soshi instead sought to use tejina as a way of understanding the Nothing so they could better thwart its schemes and fight its manifestations. In so doing, the Soshi came to learn that the Void was the strongest way to oppose the Nothing, yet at the same time they found hints of a disturbing possibility – that the Nothing and the Void were in some way intimately connected.

This is a paradox, for the Nothing is fundamentally different from all the rest of reality; it exists apart from creation and should have no stable presence within it. Even in its various manifestations or avatars in the material world, such as the Shadow Dragon, the Nothing is inimical to material existence. It is similar to rust on steel – a corrosive presence that does not belong and that left unchecked will eventually destroy the fabric of the metal. This is why the Void, the binding fabric of reality itself, is inimical to the Nothing. And yet, according to the studies of the Hidden Moon Dojo, it apparently has some connection to the Nothing as well... though the source or nature of that connection remains a mystery.

Some Soshi have engaged in dark speculations about this connection, pointing to the ancient legends of how all of creation was originally derived from the Three Sins of Nothing and suggesting this means the Void itself was born from the Nothing and is connected to it in some way. Perhaps this is why the Nothing seems to be aware of so much of the material world, able to know when men are engaged in activities it can use to exploit and consume them. However, these remain mere speculations, never as much as whispered outside the guarded confines of the Hidden Moon Dojo.

Regardless of such questionable theories, the fact remains that the Soshi research into the Nothing has led them to develop deeper insights into the Void. Some Soshi shugenja involved in these explorations have gained a heightened attunement to the Void and a correspondingly

greater degree of control over their interactions with it. Much like the examples of Asahina Hira and Tamori Wotan, who expressed an innate control of Void, the Soshi approach represents a distinct – albeit very specialized – way to access Void magic.

The Kitsu of the Lion Clan

Like the Soshi, the Kitsu do not inherently exhibit any greater tendency towards Void proficiency or the occurrence of potential ishi among their number. Rather, again like the Soshi, the Kitsu have developed an enhanced understanding of the Void and its nature through their own pursuits. Due to their particular focus on reverence and communion with the ancestors, the Kitsu spend considerable time and effort working to understand the various Spirit Realms and the ways they interrelate. A byproduct of this effort is a deeper appreciation for the fundamental structure of all the realms, which has led to deeper insights into the Void – which touches and is touched by all of them.

The Kitsu differ from the Soshi, however, in that they do not generally devote a great deal of effort to this greater understanding of Void. A painter is certainly aware of his canvas, and is sure to be concerned with how its color and texture affect his work, but he is not fixated on it; rather, his focus is on his work. Similarly, the Kitsu have an enhanced understanding of the Void and try to better comprehend how it can affect their communion with the revered ancestors and their journeys from one Spirit Realm to another. However, their focus remains on the ancestors and the Spirit Realms, not on the Void in its own right.

A GM who wishes to reflect a heightened attunement to the Void among the Kitsu can do so by allowing them a slight discount on the purchase of the *Ishiken-do* Advantage, such as letting it cost only 7 Points for Kitsu characters.



The Grand Masters of the Elements

As already noted, most of those born with an attunement to the Void are found and dealt with by the Isawa ishi in order to prevent untrained talents from roaming the Empire. There are only a few known instances (most of them already mentioned in this chapter) of individuals who have escaped the attention of the Isawa ishi but still gone on to become disciplined adepts of the Void. However, there is a special instance of Void shugenja who come into their own without the involvement of the ishi: the supremely rare individuals known as the Grand Masters of the Elements.

All the known instances of such remarkable persons have gone by the family name of Naka. In fact, Naka is not a true family name in the conventional sense, but rather more of a title. The word means “understanding,” and the name is given only to a specific individual (never more than one in each generation) chosen by the Celestial Dragons to be the Grand Master of the Elements. The criteria for choosing the Grand Master is known only to the Dragons. The one commonality among those known to have carried the title is that they were all ronin, suggesting that a lack of any particular clan affiliation is a prerequisite. The purpose of the Grand Masters is to assist in protecting the Empire and its people from supernatural threats and to foster the ongoing quest for Enlightenment. Naka Kaeteru was the first Grand Master, receiving the title in the earliest days of the Empire. The subsequent lineage of Grand Masters is unclear, as not all have sought prominence and many conducted themselves in obscurity. The best known of the Grand Masters are those of the twelfth century – Naka Kuro and his apprentice and successor Naka Tokei – and at the dawn of the thirteenth century, Naka Mahatsu.

The Grand Masters are not merely a Void shugenja but in fact are skilled adepts with *all* of the Elements. Nonetheless, the Grand Masters are as powerful as any *ishiken* with respect to Void, thanks to their particular relationship with the Elemental Dragons.

The Nature of Void Magic

A skilled Void shugenja can manifest a broad range of effects based on the Void, from subtle detection of the thoughts of others to the outright unbinding of an object into its constituent Elements. In general, however, Void magic can be subdivided into three broad categories – Sensation, Alteration, and Disruption.

Sensation

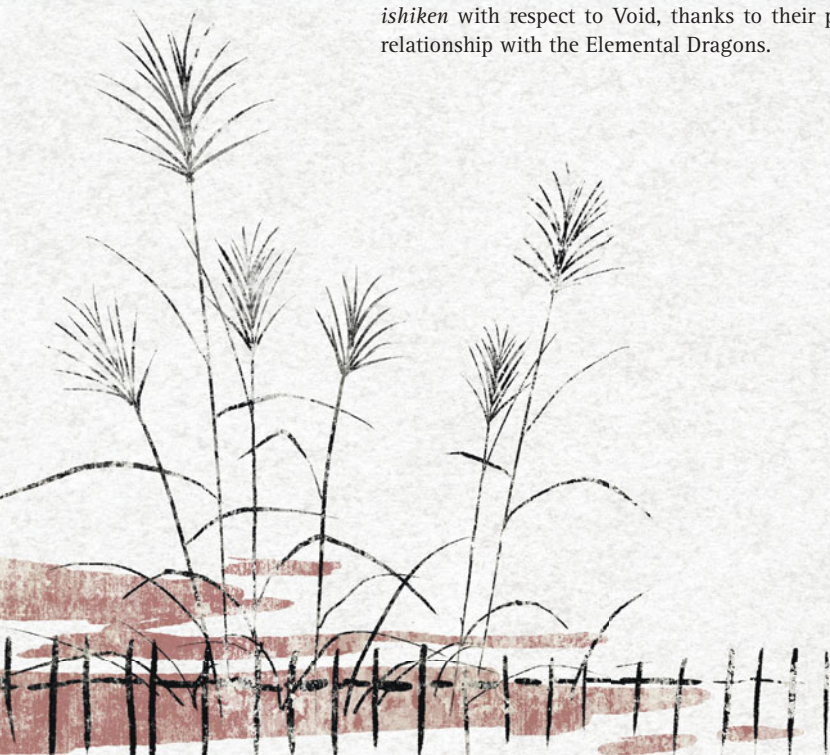
“In the Void, all things are seen and heard. But if you wish to find just one man, you must learn to find a raindrop that has already fallen into a pool.”

– Isawa Kimi, Master of Void

The Void encompasses all things. There is no place, no thing, which the Void does not touch. (The sole exception to this may be the Nothing, although even that is uncertain.) For those with the talent to perceive the Void, it is possible to discern much about the world as it is – and, if the adept has sufficient power and strength of will, possibly about the world in the past and future as well.

That said, using the Void as a medium of sensation for perceiving things about the world requires tremendous insight and surpassing clarity of thought. This is because the Void, true to its inherently contradictory nature, is both deceptively featureless and infinitely complex. An apprentice ishi exposed to the Void for the first time is overwhelmed by both its vast emptiness and its minute intricacy. The mortal mind is limited and frail, accustomed to sensing the world through the five senses. Exposure to the Void bypasses these narrow channels of perception the way a massive flood overwhelms a drainage ditch, inundating the mind with experience. Without the anchor of his master, an apprentice is liable to be instantly lost, his identity submerged by a tsunami of thoughts, feelings, events, and connections. To the untrained mind the result can be confusion or disorientation at best, permanent damage at worst – potentially including insanity and catatonia. Even trained and disciplined minds have to struggle to avoid being swept away by the wash of communing with everything.

To an *ishiki* or *ishiken* capable of withstanding the surge of sensations, however, the opportunity exists to see, understand, and know much more of what is happening in the world around him. The most powerful and daring Void adepts can even attempt to see into the past or probe the future. To someone truly talented in the way of Void, the entirety of existence is an open book, with all things revealed and nothing secret. Such adepts will often describe the Void as a “tapestry” whose threads are the uncountable connections between all things in existence. Even this is a pale imitation of the infinitely more complex truth, but it at least offers some sense of the fundamental nature of the Void to those who cannot themselves perceive it.



Void Spells of Sensation

BOUNDLESS SIGHT (VOID 1)

The prayer called Boundless Sight is simple but potentially very powerful. The ability to see and hear everything that transpires in a given location without being detected obviously has tremendous potential for spying – with correspondingly little risk, given the 50 mile range. This ability is accurate to the power and flexibility of the Void, but some GMs may be uncomfortable with it from a gameplay standpoint. In this case, some rebalancing can be accomplished by more rigorously enforcing the need for the caster to be “familiar” with the location (as in having been there before). For example, if the caster has lived, worked, or studied in the location, this is obviously sufficient. However, attempting to apply the effect to the common room of an inn the shugenja has visited once a year earlier for a single drink is much more problematic. GMs concerned about abuse may want to consider requiring Raises for casting the spell, based on the level of familiarity with the location:

- ☉ **Intimately familiar:** Any time in the past, the caster lived or studied in the location for a lengthy period of time, i.e. more than three months – No Raises required
- ☉ **Very familiar:** Within the last three years, the caster resided or worked in the location for more than one month but less than three months – One Raise required
- ☉ **Generally familiar:** Within the last three years, the caster spent more than one week but less than one month in the location – Two Raises required
- ☉ **Vaguely familiar:** Any time the caster spent in the location less than described above – Three Raises required

The GM may also wish to consider an Honor Loss, equivalent to “Using a Low Skill,” for using this spell to spy on others. Of course, this can be affected by circumstances, e.g. a caster using the spell to gather information on a clear enemy of the Empire such as a gaijin or a Shadowlands creature should probably not lose Honor.

SEE THROUGH LIES (VOID 1)

DRINK OF YOUR ESSENCE (VOID 2)

Both of these spells have a similar effect: they reveal game-mechanical characteristics of a target to the caster. This represents the Void’s ability to embrace all aspects of reality and see through all false fronts to perceive the essence of anything.

In the case of See Through Lies, this ability allows a caster to learn the highest point-value Advantage or Disadvantage possessed by the target. Again, some GMs may feel concern that this is over-powered for a Rank 1 spell, though of course the GM can control the exact amount of information gained; for example, the GM may reveal that the target possesses the Dark Secret Disadvantage, but not the exact nature of that Dark

Secret. Alternatively, since the spell allows for Raises to know additional Advantages or Disadvantages, the GM may allow Raises to be used to learn more details about them as well. Using the example above, one Raise might be required to learn the target’s Dark Secret involves his family; two Raises reveals that it involves members of his family belonging to the Kolat; three Raises exposes his father and brother as Kolat; and so on.

Of course, GMs who prefer to maintain the greater power of Void can simply give all this information to the caster without Raises. The GM can also choose to give the full information on some occasions but not on others; the Void is, after all, inconstant.

SENSE VOID (VOID 1)

This spell allows the caster to become aware of the existence and location of living things within its Area of Effect. Given the peculiar and complex relationship between the Nothing and the Void, it is suggested that manifestations of the Nothing – such as Shadowspawn or anything else fully corrupted by it – be “invisible” to this spell. Alternatively, they can appear as gaps in the caster’s awareness, similar to Shadowlands creatures and spirits.

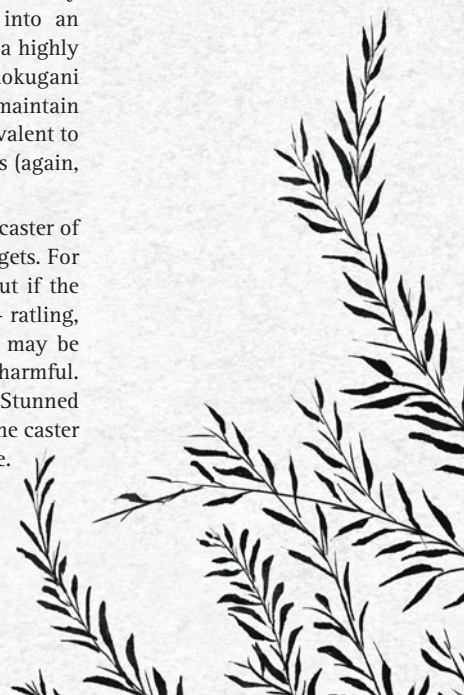
WITNESS THE UNTOLD (VOID 1)

This spell allows a Void shugenja to interrupt another’s action, anything from the angry strike of a bandit thug to the mighty blow of an Oni Lord. However, the Void’s reach can be sensed and countered by exceptionally powerful creatures. The GM may wish to limit or even disallow this effect for particularly powerful beings (including higher Rank Void shugenja), or require Raises on the casting roll. (On the other hand, if the target already has the ability to resist the effects, such as Magic Resistance or some other form of magical protection, there is no need for further penalties.)

ECHOES IN THE VOID (VOID 3)

While generally similar in nature to other Void spells that reveal something unseen about the target, Echoes in the Void is much more intimate; the caster can actually hear the target’s thoughts. Such an intrusion into an individual’s innermost being could be considered a highly dishonorable act, very much at odds with the Rokugani desire to maintain one’s On and help others to maintain theirs. The GM may wish to treat this spell as equivalent to “Using a Low Skill” for the purposes of Honor loss (again, specific circumstances may mitigate this).

The GM should also consider the impact on the caster of overhearing the thoughts of particular sorts of targets. For most humans, this is not likely to be an issue, but if the target is insane, or a member of another species – ratling, Naga, or even an oni – the overheard thoughts may be muddled, confusing, corrupting, or outright harmful. This can be reflected by inflicting the Dazed or Stunned Condition on the caster, or perhaps even placing the caster at risk of Taint or Shadow corruption if applicable.





Note that nothing technically precludes this spell from being used on another player character. In such a case the GM can opt to engage both the caster's and the target's players, encouraging them to role-play the situation. However, some players may find this awkward or off-putting, so it may be sufficient for the target to simply summarize his character's thoughts during the duration of the spell. The GM may also choose to veto the use of the spell on a PC as inappropriate to the proper spirit for the game, especially if the targeted player might be upset or offended by such an intrusion.

READ THE ESSENCE (VOID 3)

The effect of this spell is relatively straightforward. However, much as with Echoes in the Void, opening oneself to the influence of particularly strange or powerful items may be risky, especially if their nature is inimical. This could be something as dire as inflicting Shadowlands Taint or Shadow corruption. Alternatively, the GM could make it clear that proceeding with the spell carries the risk of such an outcome, with the chance of corruption based on an appropriate roll (e.g. an Earth Ring Roll for the Taint, a Void Ring Roll for the Lying Darkness). The visions about the item and its past could also be suitably dark and unpleasant, but should always impart significant information given the risk to the caster.

RING OF THE VOID (VOID 6)

This extremely powerful spell allows the caster to commune directly with the Elemental Dragon of Void. This is extremely potent, but the perils of its use are clear. When one is communing with the Void Dragon, one is communing with what amounts to a god; the Void Dragon is a vast and supremely powerful being, a resident in Tengoku. (Of course, individuals who are powerful enough to cast this spell should already be well aware of the perils of attempting to commune with one of the Elemental Dragons.) This spell provides an excellent roleplaying opportunity for the GM to depict an entity of unique power and enigmatic nature, providing the caster with whatever information suits him. The Void Dragon is a supremely confident being, arrogant and self-assured, with no human weakness or doubt.

Given the sheer power of this spell, the GM is justified in making it very difficult to cast, restricting the number of times it can be cast by a given character, or otherwise making it clear that the use of this spell is a special and momentous event. Under no circumstances should it become a regular or routine means of obtaining information; casters who attempt to use it too frequently or for what the Void Dragon would consider trivial reasons, or those who fail to treat the Dragon with the utmost respect and reverence, may find themselves censured by the Heavens. This could include being completely cut off from Void magic for a time, temporarily suffering the effects of a suitable Spiritual Disadvantage, or – if the transgression is severe enough to warrant it – physical debilitation or death. The Void Dragon, as the spell notes, can readily cause the caster to cease existing, either

temporarily or permanently. Nor is there any recourse; no mortal, no matter how powerful, is able to prevail in a struggle against the Celestial Heavens.

Even if the caster emerges from the communion without angering the Dragon, there should be consequences for direct exposure to the divinity of Tengoku. It would be reasonable for the caster to suffer a Dazed or Stunned Condition for a time, with resistance or recovery based on a Void Ring Roll against a TN of at least 20. Another option is to have the caster afflicted by the Touch of the Void Disadvantage, again resisted by a Void Ring Roll. On the other hand, there could be beneficial side effects as well. The GM could consider giving a character a temporary or even permanent Advantage such as Touch of the Spirit Realms (Tengoku) or – depending on the outcome of role-playing with the Void Dragon or the GM's story needs – the Great Destiny or Higher Purpose Advantage. This spell offers many opportunities to widen the scope of the game, but neither GM nor players should lose sight of the fact that this spell is a major undertaking with the potential for both huge benefits and truly dire consequences.

Void Spells of Alteration

"The tapestry of the Void allows all things to be rewritten."
— Isawa Kimi, Master of Void

Earth, Air, Fire, and Water are the Elements of substance; the "stuff" of all things is made of these four Elements in varying proportions. These Elements also influence the shape and nature of things; thick fog feels damp and clammy because of its Water, a table is sturdy because of its Earth, and a lantern glows and gives off light because of its Fire. However, it is Void that explicitly determines an object's form and identity. Fog is fog, the table is a table, and the lantern is a lantern, and none of these things are other things... because Void binds their other Elements together and gives them shape in accordance with the thing they are. To draw on the analogy of writing on paper: ink is essentially Water, with a pigment made of Earth, and by itself it is just a fluid, entirely formless. When it is brushed onto a blank page to form a kanji, however, it assumes a form, an identity as that particular kanji, defined by the white space around it, the emptiness of the page that it does not fill. This white space, this emptiness, is the Void.

Implicit in this is that if it is possible for the Void to change, or to be changed, then the shape, nature, and even the identity of a physical thing can be changed as well. The Void is thus an Element of both identity and of change. Void defines the caterpillar and the moth, but also the change from one to the other. Accordingly, those who are capable of perceiving the Void can – if they have sufficient willpower and knowledge – alter it, and thereby alter things in the real world.

Like all manifestations of power, this ability to alter things is in itself neither good nor bad; it simply is. It is the use to which such power is put that defines its morality. For all of the spells described here, the GM should carefully consider the intent, the result, and the corresponding consequences for a caster – a gain or

loss of Honor or Glory, or perhaps more dramatic outcomes. Shugenja are already considered strange and enigmatic by most Rokugani, viewed with both respect and wariness. Void shugenja are much more so. Accordingly, blatant and egregious use of the Void to alter the nature of reality will be viewed with awe – but awe can rapidly become mistrust and even fear.

DRAWING THE VOID (VOID 1)

This spell allows the caster access to additional Void Points. While the spell does apply a limit to the number of extra Void Points that can be gained, and gives them a “shelf life” if they are not used, the GM should be wary of frequent or repeated uses of this spell, especially when combined with other Void spells. For example, the Rank 2 Void spell Kharmic Intent allow Void Points to be shared between its caster and another individual; other effects, such as the Rank 5 Technique of the Shosuro Infiltrator School, allow for essentially unlimited Void expenditure to change an attack’s Damage dice to exploding 10’s.

To be sure, exploiting these sorts of combinations is often considered part of the fun of an RPG, and creative uses of various effects and Techniques should not be discouraged. Rather, GMs should make sure such powerful effects are not allowed to run rampant and spoil everyone’s enjoyment of the game by reducing it to little more than a demonstration of cunning exploitation of the letter of the rules. Thus, a GM should feel free to apply sensible limits to Drawing on the Void, perhaps by allowing it to be cast only once per day.

FLOW THROUGH THE VOID (VOID 1)

This innocuous-seeming spell has the potential, if used in particular ways, to be inordinately powerful. For example, changing a key stone in a structure from Earth to Water could result in a catastrophic collapse; changing a small volume of Air to Fire in a packed warehouse could lead to a massive conflagration. Such calamities, unless caused for particularly compelling reasons, should lead to Honor and/or Glory losses for the shugenja perpetrating them. Depending on the outcome, the loss could be a mere 1 or 2 points if relatively little damage results, ascending to much greater penalties if there is loss of life or severe property damage. In especially egregious situations, the resulting harm could even be considered a crime, punished as such by the relevant authorities (which could include the Jade Magistrates).

As a Rank 1 spell, Flow Through the Void should have only limited value as a weapon against other persons or creatures. It could be argued that changing the Elemental Air in a foe’s lungs to Water would likely be fatal; however, this spell really should not be allowed to have such a powerful effect. The GM may simply wish to rule that this spell cannot affect the Elements in a living being, or that it has only a limited effect, at worst making the target

uncomfortable and distracting him (perhaps applying a temporary penalty to his TNs).

THE VOID’S CARESS (VOID 1)

This spell allows the caster to temporarily remove Mental or Spiritual Disadvantages from the target. However, this should not be a universal panacea. Some Disadvantages should be exempt or require additional effort to remove; even then, it may result in further consequences for the caster. For example, removing a Seven Fortunes’ Curse is effectively removing the censure of a divine being from the affected individual. This may simply not be possible for a mortal to achieve, or it may bring the wrath of the divinity in question on the caster for attempting it. The following Disadvantages should particularly be considered in this context by the GM:

- ☉ Cursed by the Realm
- ☉ Dark Fate
- ☉ Haunted
- ☉ Lord Moon’s Curse
- ☉ Momoku
- ☉ Seven Fortunes’ Curse

Attempting to remove these Disadvantages should be, if not impossible, at the least require additional Raises on the spell – at least 3 if not more. In the case of Cursed by the Realm and the Seven Fortunes Curse, the caster may also be punished by the very affliction he is attempting to remove, either temporarily (as a warning) or permanently (as a punishment). Such is the fate of those who seek to override the will of a divine being or an entire spiritual realm.

It may be noted that the spell already specifies that the Shadowlands Taint cannot be removed. The corruption of the Nothing is a different matter; it is not actually a Spiritual Disadvantage by the rulebook, and thus would presumably be wholly immune to this spell – but on the other hand, Void is often the force most strongly opposed to the Lying Darkness, so the GM may consider letting this spell at least slightly reduce a character’s Shadow corruption.





ALTERING THE COURSE (VOID 2)

As noted under Drawing the Void above, GMs should be wary of the potential for this spell to allow for a dramatic skewing of rolls via unlimited expenditure of Void. However, such concerns are somewhat mitigated by the fact that only the Void shugenja himself can benefit from this spell. If the GM does see an issue, a limit may be applied; for example, restricting the number of additional Void Points that may be spent on a given roll to the caster's Void Ring. Also, the expenditure of additional Void Points to gain additional temporary Ranks in a Skill (beyond the one Rank normally allowed by Void Point expenditure) should never be permitted, since there is already a spell – the Rank 3 Void spell Moment of Clarity – intended to provide just this type of effect.

THE EMPTY VOICE (VOID 2)

FALSE WHISPERS (VOID 2)

These two spells are considered together not because of their particular effects, which are quite straightforward, but rather because of the consequences of those effects. The stealthy casting of spells or the manipulation of another individual into saying something untoward are both almost always dishonorable undertakings. Since Honor is an internal quality and applies even to actions taken in secrecy, a Void shugenja who uses these spells for nefarious purposes – for strict personal gain, for example, or to conceal a crime – should definitely be assessed an Honor loss. Again, each spell could be considered equivalent to “Using a Low Skill” (although the usual mitigating circumstances may apply).

Much as with Echoes in the Void, GMs should consider the potential out-of-character impact of allowing a Void shugenja to use False Whispers on another player character – especially if it is done repeatedly. Ideally, the two players should be willing to role-play the situation; if

not, the GM may want to allow the player character to contest the effect with a Void or Willpower Roll against the Void shugenja's Spell Casting Roll. Just as with Echoes in the Void, the GM is within his rights to declare the spell can only be used once on a given player character or even not at all. As always, the harmony of the play group and everyone's enjoyment of the game should be the ultimate deciding factor.

REACH THROUGH THE VOID (VOID 2)

This spell, which allows the caster to remotely manipulate small objects through the Void, does not explicitly prohibit targeting living beings. Thus, in theory, a Void shugenja could influence the movement of another character, such as by using the spell to

manipulate his foot and trip him, or moving his hand to spoil a bow-shot or sword-strike. The GM may not have any issue with this; alternatively, he may wish to allow the target a chance to resist the effect, contesting it with an appropriate Trait or Ring roll. For instance, attempting to trip a character could allow that character to roll Agility against the caster's Spell Casting Roll; success means he manages to recover and is unaffected. The GM should also consider the specific circumstances. An ogre's hand may weigh five pounds, making it an eligible target for the spell, but the musculature and weight of the ogre's hand, arm, and shoulder combined may prevent the spell from having any effect.

The spell makes no specifications about the force involved in moving the object. If the caster wishes to employ the object as a projectile or use it in a similar forceful way, the GM should either require Raises or simply disallow the spell from having such an effect.

KHARMIC INTENT (VOID 3)

This spell forges a link between two characters, but such things are dependent on the two souls remaining in harmony. Thus, it is suggested that either party in the spell be able to sever the link (thus immediately terminating the spell) as a Simple Action. Likewise, the spell's effects should cease if either of the participants moves outside the spell's Range. In both cases, remaining Void Points in the pool are immediately divided between the participants, up to their normal maximum. If by some circumstance there would still be Void Points left in the pool after this division (for example, one of the participants is killed while the pool is “full”), they will most likely be lost, although they could also be applied to the Void shugenja in the same manner as those obtained from the spell Drawing the Void. Under no circumstances should a character who is not a Void shugenja ever receive more than their normal maximum number of Void Points.



MOMENT OF CLARITY (VOID 3)

As noted under *Altering the Course*, this spell allows the caster to briefly gain Skills he otherwise would not have. GMs may wish to allow the caster to use Raises to gain Emphases to the Skill as well. For example, if the caster gained the *Iaijutsu* Skill, with one Raise he could also gain the Focus Emphasis to that Skill, while two Raises would grant both Focus and Assessment. This would reflect the caster delving more deeply into the Void to draw out even more detailed and specific knowledge about the Skill he is seeking. Also, note that for “Macro Skills” (such as Lore and Craft), the caster must specify the Sub-Skill at the time of casting.

BALANCE OF ELEMENTS (VOID 4)

This spell is a more powerful version of *The Void's Caress*, and as with that spell it is suggested that some Disadvantages not be affected by the spell, require additional effort, and/or draw the wrath of divine powers.

DIVIDE THE SOUL (VOID 5)

The Range given for this spell is “Personal,” but the only limitation on how far away the second version of the caster may appear is that it must be “within your sight” when casting the spell. Since there are spells that allow places to be viewed remotely, it is theoretically possible for the second manifestation to materialize in some far remote location – somewhere else in the Empire, or even further afield such as in the *Burning Sands* or the *Ivory Kingdoms*. The GM will have to determine how much latitude he wishes to allow for this effect. It may be noted that the spell has no inherent ability to circumvent protections such as the magical wards guarding the Imperial Palace. On the other hand, it is a Rank 5 spell and therefore presumed to be extremely powerful. Still, the GM may wish some locations – even if within the caster's sight – to be inaccessible or at least difficult to access (requiring Raises on the Spell Casting Roll).

Another issue that could arise is the duplication of equipment. It is reasonable to assume that mundane items such as clothing, normal weapons, and so on are also duplicated. Spell scrolls should be duplicated as well, since both manifestations are capable of casting. However, unique and powerful items such as *nemuranai* should not be duplicated; the GM should specify that these either remain with the “original” caster or require the caster to choose which manifestation will possess each unique item at the time of casting.

It is also reasonable to assume that anything that affects one of the manifestations would affect both – and if appropriate, remain in effect after the spell ends. This includes Conditions such as *Dazed* or *Stunned*, Honor gains and losses, acquired Advantages and Disadvantages, and so forth. Of course, there may be some circumstances where this would not be true; for example, if one of the manifestations incurs a Glory loss while in the distant *Burning Sands*, this may not be applicable if the “real” caster is still in *Rokugan*.

Finally, the spell does not specify which of the manifestations ceases to exist when the effect ends. An overly clever (or abusive) player may attempt to use the spell as a form of “teleportation” by having the original manifestation be the one that ceases to be while the new one, in its new location, carries on. Again, since this is a Rank 5 spell, the GM may wish to allow this – but will also be within his rights to require the “original” version of the caster to be the one that persists after the spell ends.

REFORGE (VOID 5)

Transforming physical objects is a powerful ability but one that should have some limitations when it comes to legendary artifacts and *nemuranai*. Potent items should be either wholly impervious to this spell or require a challenging number of Raises to transform. Even a Rank 5 Void spell should not be able to transform something as dire and potent as the *Anvil of Despair* or the *Ruby of Iuchiban* into a mundane object, and even relatively feeble “standard” *nemuranai* should require one or more Raises to be successfully transformed.

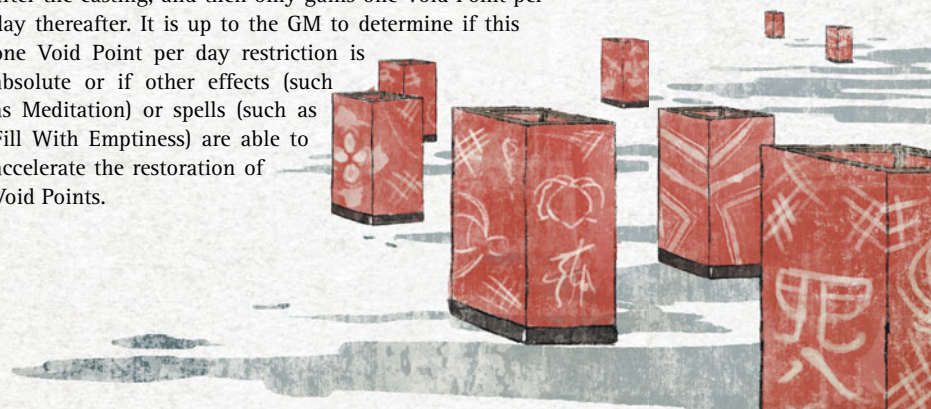
RISE FROM THE ASHES (VOID 6)

This spell is one of the most powerful effects in a Void shugenja's arsenal, since it allows a complete “reset” on a target individual, restoring them to their state from eight hours previous (although it will not restore a dead individual to life). Note that the “reset” removes all effects from the last eight hours, both negative and beneficial, so gains in Honor, Glory, and Experience Points, as well as new items or equipment, would all be lost.

Of course, this spell does create a problematic issue with any in-game knowledge the restored character may have obtained during the “undone” period of time. The GM should make it clear to the character's player what key information is lost, and the player should take this into account in any subsequent role-playing and actions. For example, if the character had learned the secret identity of an assassin and then was restored to prior to gaining that knowledge, he should no longer know that secret identity and the player should depict the character accordingly.

Note, however, that the character's own actions and the influence he has had on the world will not be undone. This spell is not an actual reversal of time, but merely restores the character to his earlier self. If he killed a samurai in a duel, that samurai is still dead – although the character will not know that because for him (and him alone) the duel has not happened.

The spell description notes that the caster loses all of his Void Points, cannot regain Void Points for three days after the casting, and then only gains one Void Point per day thereafter. It is up to the GM to determine if this one Void Point per day restriction is absolute or if other effects (such as *Meditation*) or spells (such as *Fill With Emptiness*) are able to accelerate the restoration of Void Points.





Void Spells of Disruption

"When one is attuned with the Void, eradicating creatures such as these is a trivial problem."

— Isawa Takashi

All of the Elements have the potential to be destructive. Wildfires burn forests and towns; water rises in crashing tsunamis or floods low-lying areas; the earth quakes and levels buildings, or crushes them under avalanches; storm winds wreak havoc across the land. But as terrifying as these things are, all pale in comparison to the destructive potential of the Void.

The Void binds the Elemental structure of all things together and gives them shape and identity; implicit in this is the capacity for that structure to be unbound, the things so affected to be rendered down to their constituent Elements and thus destroyed – or even erased from existence entirely. These are not trivial things to do; only very powerful shugenja, well-versed in the ways of Void, can achieve such dramatic results. But even lesser ishi can use the Void to inflict significant harm. Exposure to the raw Void can damage things in the material world; it can also do great injury to ordinary mortals, whose minds are not capable of withstanding the overwhelming flood of thought, feeling, emotion, and experience. This is why the term used here is "disruption" rather than "destruction." It is possible to do tremendous harm to men using the Void without actually causing physical injury; their minds can be blasted by exposure to it, leaving them impaired, insane, catatonic, or even dead.

No matter how it manifests, using the Void as a weapon carries grave risks for those who would do so. Just as the *ishiken* of the Isawa remain vigilant for signs of new Void talents, they also keep watch for disruptions in the Void, indications that it is being used to cause harm, either inadvertently or with intent. The *ishiken* will move quickly to investigate such things and if they believe it necessary they will act swiftly and decisively to end them. If that means the destruction of the perpetrators, so be it.

TOUCH THE EMPTINESS (VOID 1)

VOID STRIKE (VOID 4)

Mechanically, these spells are similar; they both inflict damage (in the form of Wounds) on a target. Both draw on the same general effect: exposing the target to the Void directly. The damage is expressed as physical Wounds, but some of it actually represents the harm done to the target's mind. In any case, the use of Void for such a purpose is an extreme effect; if done gratuitously or without good reason, it should probably result in an Honor loss, albeit a small one. This is not to penalize characters for using spells they have obtained in good faith; rather, the point should be to underscore the enormity of using the Void as a crude bludgeon. The GM can also consider giving the caster a small Glory penalty or even an Infamy award, reflecting the awe and terror aroused in those witnessing such a display of raw power. Incinerating, drowning, or crushing enemies is spectacular, but these things can at least be understood; the Void is beyond the comprehension of most Rokugani and thus far more likely to elicit feelings of both wonder and dread.

SEVERED FROM THE STREAM (VOID 2)

VOID RELEASE (VOID 3)

Both of these spells affect a target's Void Points. Severed from the Stream inhibits the target's ability to spend them, while Void Release allows the caster to steal them from the target. Naturally, only beings who possess Void Points can be affected by either spell, so non-humans who lack Void (or who have a different Trait that replaces it, such as Nezumi with Name or Naga with Akasha) are impervious to these spells.

DRAW CLOSED THE VEIL (VOID 4)

The ability to banish spirits from the mortal realm is potentially very powerful indeed; many Kuni and Toritaka shugenja would dearly love to have such an ability, but skill with the Void is exceptionally rare in their ranks.

As written, the spell allows corporeal creatures to resist its effects with a Contested Willpower Roll, but non-corporeal spirits such as *gaki* do not benefit from such a roll. As the spell notes, the GM can choose to render very powerful spirits immune to the effect, or allow them a Contested Willpower Roll.

The GM may wish to consider if there could be repercussions to such banishment. For example, banishing an *oni* may cause that *oni* to become the caster's bitter enemy, determined to return to Ningen-do, find him, and wreak revenge on him. Alternatively, a sufficiently powerful spirit could visit its wrath on the caster through a curse (for instance, the caster could be afflicted with the appropriate Cursed by the Realm Disadvantage). In any case, both GM and players should look at such outcomes as opportunities for further story development and role-play as the caster must deal with the wrath of vengeful spirits.

It may be noted that the minions of the Nothing are immune to this spell.





UNBOUND ESSENCE (VOID 5)

UNMAKE THE WORLD (VOID 6)

Both of these potent spells can have dramatic effects on their targets – randomly reordering their Rings and Traits in the case of Unbound Essence, and outright destroying them in the case of Unmake the World. The GM may need to balance the use of these powerful spells against the nature of their targets. Unbound Essence allows for no form of resistance aside from whatever might be innate to the target; the GM might wish to require Raises if the target is particularly powerful, or require a Contested Void Roll to make the spell take effect. (Against a divine or near-divine being the spell probably fails entirely.) Unmake the World does allow the effect to be resisted with a Contested Roll (the caster's Void against the target's Earth), but the GM may decide that for some targets – another *ishiken*, for example – a Contested Void Roll is more appropriate.

Again, attempting to destroy certain targets may have greater ramifications. For example, the spell notes that attempting to destroy powerful nemuranai could rouse the kami within the awakened object to defend themselves. Likewise, beings who are divine in nature may visit appropriate curses on the caster – assuming they do not simply destroy the caster in turn.

The Void and the World

As should be clear by now, the Void – while an Element – is very different from the other four. It is neither material nor substance, it lacks any specific characteristic properties (such as the way that Fire produces heat and light, or Water flows and is wet). Perhaps most fundamentally, there are no kami, no spirits of Void. So while shugenja pray to the kami of the other Elements, beseeching them to do their bidding, this is neither relevant nor possible for those shugenja seeking to interact with the Void. So how do shugenja cause effects derived from the Void to manifest? What is the mechanism by which shugenja actually interact with the Void?

The answer to this is unclear. Clearly, there is a Void “talent” that exists among mortal humans, one that reveals itself in certain individuals when they are born. Like the ability to speak with the kami of the other Elements, this seems to be an innate gift, something with which one is born, not something that can be taught or learned. A facility to speak with the kami is known to run in certain bloodlines, the source of the Empire's various shugenja families. In the Scorpion Clan, for example, shugenja are much more prevalent in the Soshi and Yogo families than in the Bayushi or Shosuro. Likewise in the Lion Clan, the Kitsu family contains many shugenja while the Ikoma, Matsui, and Akodo contain very few. Rokugani scholars speculate this may simply be a legacy of the family founders, carried down through successive generations. However, this answer is incomplete in many

ways. Returning to the prior examples, Soshi was merely an alternate identity for Shosuro, while the Kitsu family was founded by the last five of the Kitsu, one of the Five Ancient Races. Still, regardless of its origin, the correlation between shugenja families and the ability to speak to the Elemental kami is clear.

The situation is much less clear regarding Void. There is only one family in Rokugan in which the Void talent is clearly associated: the Isawa of the Phoenix Clan. Even then, while other shugenja families in the Empire typically display affinities for particular Elements – the Soshi favoring Air, the Iuchi often attuned to Water – the Isawa seem to have an equal association with all four Elements. It is unclear whether the Isawa have a greater tendency to be attuned to the Void simply because they are in attunement with all of the Elements, or if there is something else particular and unique to the family regarding Void. Outside of the Isawa, the Void talent strikes rarely and sporadically throughout the Empire, manifesting among commoners and samurai alike. There are even occasional eta children born with an affinity for the Void.

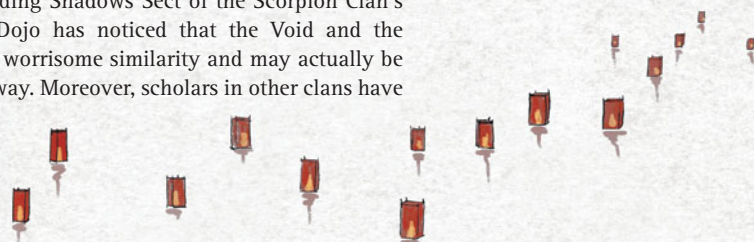
An unspoken truth resulting from this is that some Phoenix Void shugenja are actually of low birth, taken in and effectively “promoted” into the samurai caste by the ishi. This may seem to fly in the face of custom and perhaps even flout Imperial law as an egregious violation of the Celestial Order. To the Isawa, however, this promotion is spiritually justified, since those touched by the Void are obviously marked by the Celestial Heavens in a manner that not just allows but actually demands they be elevated to their proper place in the Celestial Order. The response throughout the Empire is to tacitly ignore the whole matter, treating any such shugenja as having always been members of the samurai caste.

Social, cultural, and legal ramifications of the Void talent notwithstanding, the question remains: what drives the Void's unpredictable and enigmatic touch on humans? More fundamentally, what makes the Void so uniquely human in its interaction with the world?

The Void and Others

It is believed by Rokugani scholars that Elemental magic in general, and the Void in particular, is uniquely human. Any other form of “magic” is either a base corruption of Elemental magic (such as maho) or unwholesome sorcery derived from strange and disturbing sources (such as the raising of undead monstrosities by the Jackals of the Burning Sands, the creation of the foul Destroyers by the Rhumalite cult of the Ivory Kingdoms, or the crude shamanistic powers of the Nezumi). Officially, the Empire believes that Elemental magic as practiced by men is pure and right, while any other form of power is fundamentally wrong – at best to be ignored, and at worst evil to be rooted out and destroyed.

The truth, however, is more complex. As already noted, the secretive Fading Shadows Sect of the Scorpion Clan's Hidden Moon Dojo has noticed that the Void and the Nothing have a worrisome similarity and may actually be linked in some way. Moreover, scholars in other clans have





noted and discreetly investigated similarities between the Void and the magical practices of other races, and have drawn some striking conclusions. Of course, these are discussed only in the most hushed tones and rarely if ever committed to writing, lest those involved by accused of heresy.

THE VOID AND THE NAME MAGIC OF THE NEZUMI

Nezumi Name magic is discussed in Chapter 6 of the L5R 4th Edition supplement *Enemies of the Empire*. As its name implies, it revolves around the concept of Name, which is a measure of the strength of a Nezumi's identity; by extension, Name is also a reflection of the extent to which a Nezumi interacts with and thereby changes the world simply by being part of it. Shamans of Name magic are able to effect changes to the world around them in a more active manner, altering reality through an exercise of will. Very powerful shamans can change reality in profound ways, even causing a person or thing to cease "existing"; there may remain a physical presence, but their life no longer has any meaning to the rest of the world. The target of the Nezumi's efforts has its identity wiped away, to the point where in extreme cases the target effectively has never existed at all.

The fact that this fundamental reshaping of reality seems quite similar to some powerful Void effects has not gone unnoticed among Rokugani *ishiken* and Void scholars. Moreover, the role played by Name in Nezumi culture and spirituality echoes that of Void among the Rokugani. Some speculate the Nezumi concept of Name is simply Void in another guise. While this may bring some comfort to those Rokugani considering the matter, it raises another, perhaps more troubling issue: if Name and Void are essentially the same thing, why are Nezumi shamans able to use it in such a potent manner by a simple exercise of will, without the lengthy and difficult training regimen of the *ishi*?

Shiba Ningen, the Elemental Master of the Void from the mid-to-late twelfth century, investigated this very matter and recorded some of his thoughts in his "Treatise on the Nezumi," but his crippling in the War of Dark Fire and subsequent death prevented him from taking his work to any conclusion. The questions raised by Name magic thus remain unanswered.

THE VOID AND THE AKASHA OF THE NAGA

Chapter 5 of *Enemies of the Empire* discusses Naga magic, which is focused through pearls but mimics the effects of Rokugani Elemental spells. The exception is Void; there are no pearls attuned to Void and the Naga *jakla* (spellcasters) produce no Void-like spell effects. However, the Naga are linked together by a collective soul known as the Akasha. This is more than a simple "group mind" – the Akasha effectively contains all Naga experience, and all individual Naga souls are derived from components of this experience, dispersing back into the Akasha when that Naga dies. The Akasha is the sum of

Naga reality, memory, and consciousness. It is said that Naga can even commune with the past lives that have been incorporated into their souls.

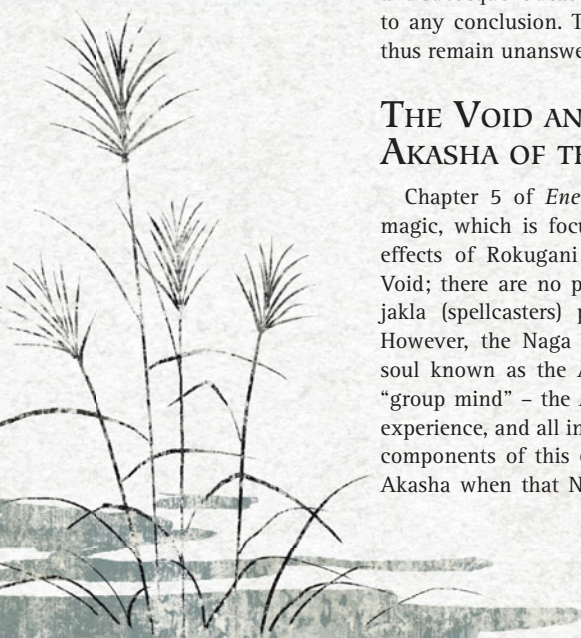
Moreover, while pearl magic produces effects which are essentially those of Elemental Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, the Akasha plays a key role for the *jakla* who produce these effects. *Jakla* draw on their connection to the Akasha and focus that power through their pearls. Thus, in many respects the Akasha resembles the Void and – much like the concept of Name to the Nezumi – may actually be an expression of the Void among the Naga. If this is so, it represents another situation that is both interesting and troublesome – interesting, because better understanding the Akasha may give Rokugani scholars deeper insight into the Void; troublesome, because the Naga as a race would seem to be attuned to the Void in a way that makes human interaction with it seem transient and almost insignificant.

THE VOID AND THE FIVE ANCIENT RACES

The Rokugani recognize that other races existed before the fall of the Kami into Ningen-do, including the Nezumi and the Naga, but also the so-called Five Ancient Races – the Kitsu, the Trolls, the Ningyo, the Kenku, and the Zokujin. Most Rokugani scholars who know about the existence of the Five Races believe they were fundamentally barbaric, not having known the power and wisdom of the Kami; privately, however, some involved in studying the Void have noted similarities between aspects of these prehistoric races and the Void.

The Rokugani associate each of the Five Races with a particular Element. While this may be yet another attempt by Imperial scholars to impose a conventional Rokugani view on the world, there does appear to be at least somewhat of an association. The aquatic Ningyo, for example, are clearly associated with Water; the subterranean Zokujin are affiliated with Earth; the winged Kenku are related to Air; and the clever Trolls to Fire. Finally, the Kitsu are considered to be associated with the Void, though it is not clear to what extent the Kitsu were truly attuned to the Void. Certainly, they were capable of travelling among the various Spirit Realms, and it may be that this facility for movement between worlds was made possible by an innate understanding of the Void which encompasses them all. If this is the case, it does not appear this connection to the Void propagated down through the bloodline established by the last surviving Kitsu into the family of that name in the Lion Clan. As noted earlier, modern Kitsu shugenja are no more likely to show affinity for the Void than any other shugenja.

Still, regardless of whether the Five Races were actually associated with the Elements or not, it is clear that each was able to perform its own type of magic. The Rokugani understand this to be some form of Elemental magic, but it is not certain this is true. The Five Races were capable of strange magical effects that have no apparent analogs in modern Rokugani magic. For example, the Five Races are described as having been at least partly responsible for bringing stability to the Elements and thus the very form of the primal world. This involved construction of a vast



city, the City of Night, at the center of which was a crystal construct designed to hold the Elements in balance and harmony. How much of this is objectively true and how much is constructed by the modern Rokugani world-view is unclear. Again, though, what is clearly evident is that the Five Races – and particularly the Kitsu – had access to powers that were either derived from the Void or were at least very similar to it. If the Five Races did indeed cause Elemental stability to manifest from the chaos of creation, then being able to manipulate the Void to impose shape and identity on the other Elements would be vital. Indeed, the scale of this sort of interaction with the Void dwarfs anything achievable by modern Rokugani.

THE VOID AND THE NOTHING

As previously described, scholars working in the Hidden Moon Dojo of the Scorpion Clan have uncovered evidence that the Void and the Nothing are potentially linked – a few of them going so far as to make the radical suggestion that the Void itself may be merely that aspect of the Nothing that was incorporated into material existence at the dawn of time. This does not directly contradict the Rokugani understanding of the creation of the universe, since the Empire's most ancient myths hold that Nothing predated creation and then underwent a fundamental change: it became aware, successively experiencing the emotions of Fear (because of its profound loneliness), Desire (for companionship), and then Regret (at having created the universe). Everything that exists is ultimately derived from the Nothing.

If the Void was born out of the Nothing, this would go some way to explaining the paradoxical nature of Void, why it is simultaneous both formless and yet incorporating everything. Of course, the implications of this are profoundly disturbing: it implies that the Nothing (or at least some expression of it) is intimately woven in the very fabric of existence. This would account for the Shadow's seeming ability to be aware of essentially anything happening anywhere, allowing its agents within creation to infiltrate almost all endeavors.

A GREAT TRUTH?

If the Void and the Nothing are really at some fundamental level the same thing, this could also explain why there is so much commonality between things that are outwardly very different. For example, the Name magic of the Nezumi, the insidious power of the Nothing, and the Void talents of the *ishiken* are all able to produce a similar effect: the erasure of things and their identities from existence.

Could it be that all of the different forms of magic and spiritual power – the Elemental magic of the Rokugani, the Name magic of the Nezumi, the Akasha of the Naga, and even more disparate effects such as the gaijin magics of the Ivory Kingdoms, the Burnings Sands, and the Yobanjin – are all actually reflections of something more basic and profound? A few bold Rokugani scholars quietly wonder why, if the Celestial Order is fundamentally right and true, these other beliefs and powers exist at all. After all, Nezumi shamans and Naga jakla may be strange and alien



to Rokugani sensibilities, but their powers to shape the world undeniably work.

This has led a few of these scholars to speculate that the magical powers of each race – including those of the Rokugani – are all right and true, at least with respect to that race. This may point to an even deeper truth, a fundamental core reality for which understanding the Void only represents one path. If there is such a basic truth, could it be that Enlightenment is actually merely a recognition of that truth? Of course, the idea that Rokugani beliefs are only one facet of a greater deeper truth would be considered blasphemous by the Empire. So for now this idea is pondered only in quiet meditation and discussed very rarely, if at all.

Mysteries and Secrets of Magic

More than any other area of Rokugani life, magic is steeped in mysteries, secrets and enigmas known only to the Void and beyond the comprehension of most mortals. This should not be surprising -- after all, shugenja themselves are merely mortals who can hear the voices of the kami, and the real power comes from the spirits themselves. Not even the greatest shugenja know every secret the kami hold, and not even the wisest Kitsu has explored all the depths of the Spirit Realms, regardless of how much Rokugan's understanding of the Elements has progressed over the years. In keeping with this book's overall theme of mysteries and enigmas, this section discusses some of the stranger and more incomprehensible aspects of magic, from the strange practices of multi-Element magic to gods which defy human comprehension. It is up to the GM to decide whether those mysteries are founded on truth or just mere legends, as it suits his campaign.

Multi-Elemental Magic

"Shall I show you what I see?" – Agasha Kyokuta

Many shugenja who are in their apprenticeships will candidly ask their sensei why spells can only be cast through the power of a single Element. After all, most things in creation are made from two or more Elements in various proportions, and man himself is made up of all five Elements. The answer, of course, is that spells are only cast through the Elemental kami – beings which are the essence of individual Elements and only see the world through the perspective of their specific Element. In theory, it would be possible to cast a spell which invoked more than one Element by beseeching the kami of several Elements at the same time. However, such an attempt is usually doomed to fail, because the kami are so different from one Element to the next that they almost never answer to the same prayers or stimuli. Beyond these practical difficulties, there is also considerable social pressure against any attempt at researching multi-Element magic. After all, Isawa never suggested such a thing to be possible, and all magic in Rokugan is descended from his discoveries and principles. Coupled with the more broadly traditionalist attitudes of the Phoenix Clan (always considered the authority on topics of magic), development of multi-Element magic has never been seen as either acceptable or worth the effort.

As often happens, however, one clan chose to be the odd one out on this topic – and again as often happens, that clan was the Dragon. The Agasha family spent centuries exploring the potential connections between the Elements, although for most of their history they focused more on the physical side of this connection (in the form of alchemy) rather than the spiritual one. Their studies proved to them that the nature of the Elements was much more fluid than what most shugenja preached. They also believed in what Shinsei had described as the unity of the world: everything is really the same thing, while shape and form and separation are merely illusions. However, their forays into multi-Element magic were often limited to little more than theory, since they preferred to focus on the more practical alchemical aspect of their magic. Still, these studies laid the groundwork for what eventually became true multi-Element magic.

During the period which later became known as the War Against the Darkness, the Agasha family left the Dragon Clan and found refuge within the Phoenix Clan, a move unprecedented since the defection of the Yasuki in the fourth century. This was a major upheaval for the Agasha, who had to abandon many of their resources, adapt to new lands, and learn to fit in with a very different clan. While they never fully abandoned their alchemical research, the family's leadership decided to refocus their main efforts on the field of multi-Element magic. This initially did not sit well with the Isawa, who saw the newcomers as challenging their mastery of the ways of Elemental magic, but the Agasha made another bold and unconventional move – they asked the Isawa for their help. By appealing to their curiosity (and pride) the Agasha greatly reduced criticism from the Isawa, and work on the new form of magic progressed



quickly. Building on their own theories and the extensive knowledge of the Isawa, the Agasha identified new prayers which could be used to appeal to kami of separate Elements – not simultaneously, but rather in very quick succession, fast enough for the disparate kami to combine their powers and create a single “spell effect.” The Isawa were ultimately quite pleased with the results, which opened up a whole new field of magic for them to research.

However, everyone was surprised by the Agasha family’s next move: the daimyo Hamanari sent copies of the six basic multi-Element spells to every shugenja family in the Empire, as well as to the Emperor himself. Agasha Hamanari was careful to mention the gift was being made on behalf of the Isawa, which meant they could do nothing to retaliate without causing a major scandal. Thus the Agasha proved they were not only resourceful vassals but also ones who would not let themselves be controlled. While many Isawa were disappointed at losing exclusivity on multi-Element magic, others understood the Agasha had acted for the good of the Empire, and Hamanari’s act helped restore the reputation of the Phoenix as the supreme authority on all matters of magic. The six basic spells allowed all the clans to pursue their own research into multi-Element magic if they wished, and several clans ultimately developed new spells of their own. The Phoenix (and the Agasha in particular) still retain the greatest knowledge of multi-Element spells, although some of the other families (such as the Moshi and the Tamori) have also embraced the concept. Of course, this new form of magic is nowhere close to being a normal or mandatory part of shugenja education anywhere in the Empire, and its full potential doubtless has yet to be discovered.

The Dragon Channelers

The power and nature of the Elemental Dragons has always been a mystery to all the samurai of Rokugan. Even the shugenja know little about these beings, for while shugenja can readily communicate with the simple elemental kami which suffuse everything in creation, the Dragons can be said to be the Elements: they are the pillars through which reality is defined, incarnations of every aspect of the physical and the spiritual. Ever since the dawn of the Empire, when Shinsei revealed much of the nature of the universe, shugenja have sought to contact the Dragons – sometimes in search of wisdom or power, sometimes simply to see if such a feat is possible at all. Such efforts were usually doomed to failure, for the Dragons dwell in Tengoku and cannot be contacted with simple prayers. The rare talented shugenja who did manage to make contact was often destroyed on the spot, for the Dragons care little for the arrogance of mortals and do not tolerate being disturbed without the most excellent reasons. For centuries, only incredibly powerful and incredibly pious and careful shugenja were able to

successfully contact the Elemental Dragons. Void shugenja had a bit more luck in their efforts, for their nature made them less prone to mortal hubris and the Void Dragon had a somewhat greater interest in the mortal world than some of its peers. Still, Void shugenja were rare and even they were seldom successful; for all intents and purposes the power of the Dragons remained off-limits to mortals.

There were, however, a few special exceptions to this rule. At the dawn of the Empire, the five Elemental Dragons selected mortals to be their eyes and their voice in Rokugan. The process turned these men and women into radically different beings which would come to be known as the Oracles (discussed in more detail in the L5R 4th Edition supplement *The Great Clans*, page 178). When an Oracle died the Dragons chose a new mortal to take up the mantle, and in this way they remained within the Empire ever since. The power of the Dragons granted the Oracles immense power over their Elements and knowledge of the universe so extensive it included the future. However, this power came with tremendous limitations, for the Dragons did not wish to upset the Celestial balance between Tengoku and Jigoku. The Oracles were forbidden to use their powers against a mortal unless the mortal attacked them first; similarly, each Oracle could answer only one question from a given individual during his lifetime, lest mortals learn too much about the future. Most Oracles became somewhat detached from mankind, often living in remote places far from civilization, content to serve the Dragons through their mere existence.

Likewise, while a few temples in Rokugan were dedicated to worship of the Dragons, these were few and far between. Samurai and commoners alike preferred to worship the Fortunes, whose attention was easier to attract and who seemed to care more about mortal affairs. Thus, the temples to the Dragons were almost solely visited by shugenja, whose studies of the Elements gave them a greater respect for these Celestial beings. The most sacred such temple (and indeed one of the most sacred





NEW DRAGONS AND ORACLES DURING THE TWELFTH CENTURY

In the mid twelfth century, two new Dragons simultaneously appeared in reaction to human interference with Celestial matters. The Jade Dragon represented purity, honor, and everything that is good within the hearts of men, while its twin the Obsidian Dragon upheld wickedness, ruthlessness, and all the baser instincts of the human race. These two Dragons were initially considered to be somewhat less powerful entities than the original seven Dragons, but their power quickly grew enough for them to select Oracles of their own. Eventually, the Jade Dragon took the role of the Sun and the Obsidian Dragon that of the Moon, replacing the “upstart mortals” who had claimed those stations at the end of the Hidden Emperor era. This in turns made their Oracles even more powerful, and they became known as the Voice of the Jade Sun and the Voice of the Obsidian Moon. Together they acted as a mouthpiece for the Heavens, and it was they who proclaimed the inception of the Iweko Dynasty. Thereafter, the Voices would sometimes appear to offer counsel to the new Empress Iweko I, further reinforcing the connection between her and the Celestial Heavens.

It was also in the twelfth century that the first two Oracles of Thunder revealed themselves to the Empire. Shugenja were initially confused, for all previous records and legends spoke of only five Oracles. However, as proved by the later Oracles of Jade and Obsidian, all of the Dragons are able to choose an Oracle if they should find need to do so. Scholars have been left to ponder if the Celestial Dragon itself has an Oracle and what level of power such an individual would possess. A more worrying question is whether the Shadow Dragon, the sinister entity created from the previous Dragon of Air when it was corrupted by Taint and the Lying Darkness, could create an Oracle of its own.

GMs can use the possibilities of a Celestial Oracle or a Shadow Oracle for all manner of campaign seeds, as PCs are sent to discover one of these Oracles, deal with the consequence of their existence, unmask impostors, or even try to destroy the Shadow Oracle.



locations in Rokugan) is the Temple of the Seven Dragons, named after the five Elemental Dragons, the Dragon of the Thunder (the embodiment of courage and heroism), and the Celestial Dragon (who resides exclusively in Tengoku and is more powerful than any other). The Temple is located in the Phoenix settlement known as the City of Remembrance, and is believed to predate the city itself and, indeed, to predate recorded history itself. Shugenja visiting the Temple always notice how easily the kami can be summoned on its grounds, even more so than in other consecrated temples. The most perceptive realized the Temple seemed to bring raw elemental energy directly from the Heavens, as if it was the foothold of the Dragons' power in the mortal world. The reasons for this remained unknown until the twelfth century, when the Grandmaster of the Elements, Naka Tokei, learned from a ryu spirit that the Temple had been built on the spot where the first five Oracles had been chosen – possibly the only place in the Empire where five Dragons had ever been present at the same time.

Shortly after this revelation, the Dragons personally chose a young priestess named Agasha Miyoshi to receive a revelation. This Celestial visitation granted her the ability to call on the Elemental power of the Dragons directly, rather than importuning kami of the Elements. Although Miyoshi never understood why she was chosen, others pointed to her piety and dedication to the Temple as proof of her worthiness. At the insistence of her superiors, Miyoshi began teaching her ways to others so they might also access this formidable level of power. Miyoshi quickly realized only the most powerful and most pious of shugenja could ever hope to master her new ways. She also recognized their power was always subject to the Dragons' approval, something which no mortal could ever predict with certainty. Less skilled spellcasters also ran the risk of severe and potentially lethal backlash if they were not able to properly control the power of the Dragons properly. Nevertheless, Miyoshi's teachings were considered a success, and her students came to be known as Dragon Channelers, wielders of the raw power of the Elements.

Ryoshun, the Missing Kami

The Empire of Rokugan was created by the Kami – the sons and daughters of Amaterasu and Onnotangu. One of them, Hantei, became the first Emperor. Another, Fu Leng, was corrupted by Jigoku and threatened the Empire for centuries thereafter. The seven remaining ones founded the Great Clans which defined the society of Rokugan. But unknown to nearly all, a tenth child was also born of the Sun and Moon. He was named Ryoshun, and was the only one to die in his father's belly, thus never reaching the Mortal Realm alive. Hantei ordered his brothers and sisters to never mention Ryoshun's name, as a form of respect to their fallen kin, and thus no mortal learned of him. A grave was erected in his honor in what would become the lands of the Badger Clan, although it remains a mystery as to how this came to pass (a more detailed discussion of this conundrum can be found in the L5R



4th Edition supplement *Secrets of the Empire*, page 22). Ryoshun himself, meanwhile, became the first Kami to ever die and find his way to Meido, the Realm of the Dead. He decided this was where he truly belonged, accepting a calling in guiding the souls of the deceased to their next life. However, this was a privilege he never accorded to himself, and while the other Kami returned to Tengoku upon their deaths, Ryoshun did not.

For most of its history, the Empire never had any idea of Ryoshun's existence. A passage of the Tao of Shinsei did refer to a tenth child of the Sun and Moon, but most scholars interpreted it as a reference to mankind, which had its origin in the blood of the Moon and the tears of the Sun. A few thought the Kami might indeed have had a tenth sibling, but dared not broach the topic lest they be accused of blasphemy, and once the Kami themselves departed the mortal world no one could ask them.

Only a few rare samurai ever had a suspicion Ryoshun even existed. Powerful Void shugenja who meditated on the Kami sometimes felt a sort of imbalance, while the best of the Kitsu sodan-senzo sometimes perceived a powerful presence in Meido, something distinct from the known power of Emma-O. Ryoshun himself kept his existence a secret, for he did not wish to interfere with his brother's mortal Empire in which he felt he had no place. The most he did was to occasionally roam Rokugan unseen. He was fond of subtly guiding mortals towards spiritual balance,

and some great discoveries may have been due to this modest influence. Aside from that, Ryoshun focused on his duties in Meido, and although the living never knew him, the dead always thanked him for his guidance.

It was not until the first half of the twelfth century, during the Hidden Emperor era, that Ryoshun's identity and influence became known to the mortal world. At the time, the forces of the Lying Darkness were trying to unmake reality. In the ruined troll city of Voltturnum, the Darkness used a mysterious artifact known as Oblivion's Gate to invade and assault the Spirit Realms, trying to erase the ancestors and with them the Celestial Wheel itself. Much information was lost during those confusing events, and only fragmentary accounts made it back to the Empire, but among those were the name and nature of Ryoshun, the Tenth Kami. Although he returned to Meido after the battle was over, his name was now known to all, and this knowledge sent a shock throughout the Empire – particularly in religious circles, as shugenja and monks had never heard of a “tenth Kami” before.

Nearly overnight, temples dedicated to his name were erected across the Empire, and the Brotherhood of Shinsei met with representatives of the major shugenja families to decide how he should be revered. Mixing rites dedicated to the other Kami with funerary prayers, the clergy of Rokugan focused on Ryoshun's role as a guide to the afterlife. Compared to the cold judgment of Emma-O, his was seen



The Children of the Last Wish

The strange artifact known as Isawa's Last Wish is without a doubt the most powerful nemuranai ever created by mortals. Its history is discussed in the L5R 4th Edition supplement *The Great Clans*, page 22. As explained in that book, this magical construct was originally supposed to be a wedding gift for the union of Isawa's daughter Akiko to Asako's son Sagoten. However, the Last Wish instead became a source of bitter conflict between the Isawa and Asako families, ultimately leading the Emperor to intervene and place the Wish under the protection of the Shiba family. The Emperor's wisdom soon became apparent when Sagoten stole the Wish and tried to use it to make Akiko love him – but instead

unleashed a magical eruption that claimed many lives, including his own and Akiko's. The Shiba retrieved the Wish and hid it away, hoping to prevent further incidents. Unfortunately, the artifact was stolen more than once in later centuries, as power-hungry shugenja sought it out only to find themselves unable to control it. For its own part, the self-aware Wish slowly grew insane, making it even more dangerous.

During the twelfth century, Asako Sagoten was granted a second chance at life when he walked through Oblivion's Gate and was restored to life. During the War of Spirits, Hantei XVI tried to use Sagoten's knowledge of the Wish to locate it and use it in his conflict against Emperor Toturi I, but Sagoten refused and escaped the Hantei's control. He easily located the Wish by himself, for he was a powerful shugenja and intimately familiar with its nature. Having had centuries to contemplate his earlier errors, Sagoten used the Wish in a selfless way for the first time and thus avoided the catastrophes it had become associated with. Instead of using it to enhance his own power or devastate his enemies, Sagoten created companions for the Wish, spirits crafted out of pure Void. Immediately afterward, he committed seppuku.

Sagoten's actions had tremendous influence on the Wish. Not only did the creatures (which called themselves Children of the Last Wish) provide both companionship and protection, but the Wish was also able to extend its senses through them. Slowly, using the strange spirits Sagoten had created, the Wish acquainted itself with the world and regained a semblance of sanity. It also learned how to communicate properly, allowing it to be used by a non-shugenja. Although it looked for a worthy bearer through its Children, the Wish was eventually found by Shiba Aikune, a man of great potential yet flawed character. Aikune immediately bonded with the Wish

as a benevolent duty marked by the pain of his own death. Although he was never revered as widely as his other brothers and sisters, Ryoshun gradually became part of the general Rokugani religious system. Still, he remained a mostly mysterious figure, and after his appearance at Voltturnum he was not heard from for many years.

However, perhaps Ryoshun's modest interest in the mortal realm was piqued by the events at Voltturnum, for after two generations he revealed himself once more. At the dawn of the Iweko Dynasty, Ryoshun felt a great upheaval was at hand, and he selected ten worthy mortals from across the Empire. Each of them was granted a token of his favor. These ten talismans, known as the Gifts of Ryoshun, were each infused with the energy of one of the Spirit Realms, granting their wearers a small fraction of that realm's power. The ten mortals' role, as dictated by Ryoshun, was to remind the Empire that the gifts of Heavens were still available to those who proved worthy of them. These samurai became links between mortals and the divine, much like Ryoshun himself had forsaken his place in Heavens to guide mankind.

At the end of the twelfth century it remained to be seen whether Ryoshun would continue to expand his interest in mankind. Some of his chosen and their talismans faded into obscurity, while others did great deeds and met with heroic deaths. Of particular note was Asahina Beniha, who received the talisman of Yume-do and later rose to become daimyo of her family. Beniha posited that shugenja could replicate the magic of the talismans, calling upon the powers of the Spirit Realms themselves instead of their inhabitants. Although her research was interrupted due to her early retirement, shugenja among her family continued to study the possibilities. Potentially, a whole new field of magic may eventually emerge from these researches.

through his intense sheer desire to help his clan and his feeling – shared with the Wish itself – of frustrated destiny.

Aikune and the Wish won great victories for the Phoenix, learning from each other through trial and error, but he finally perished in a great battle in the Shadowlands. The Wish escaped and found its way back to the Phoenix, but had to cut out pieces of itself which had been corrupted by the Shadowlands Taint. Combined with the traumatic loss of Aikune, this led the Wish to grow unstable once more, and it was eventually destroyed by Isawa Sezaru. Although many Phoenix mourned the loss of such a powerful nemuranai, others in the Isawa family were secretly relieved, for they knew the artifact was incredibly potent and near-impossible to fully control.

To everyone's surprise, however, the Children of the Last Wish did not disappear with the Wish itself. They appeared in Gisei Toshi a few days after the destruction of the Wish, offering their services to the Phoenix – including information on how to recreate the Wish. The Elemental Masters were split on the topic: while some wanted to proceed with the creation of a new Wish, others were wary of the extremely dangerous power it had displayed throughout its history. The Children themselves were likewise viewed with a mixture of interest and suspicion.

The Children of the Last Wish are powerful spirits, creations of pure Void possessed of many strange magical powers. Visually, they look like miniature versions of armored female samurai, but their intangibility allows them to go anywhere they want. They also seem to be possessed of a higher level of sentience than regular kami and show total dedication to the Wish. Much remains unknown about them. Their full number has never been determined, and since the spirits are hard to tell from one another, it remains a mystery how many exist. Although the Children can be destroyed through magical means, it is possible they can come back to life or create more of their own.

Some believe that the Children may hold the key to new forms of magic, a more natural alteration of the Elements through the power of the Void rather than the intervention of the kami, as suggested by the abilities of the Wish itself. Whether the Phoenix Masters ever allow research on these lines to proceed is still an open question, one fraught with potential risk given the past history of the Last Wish.

Prophecy in Rokugan

The Rokugani have always tried to know what lay in their future, and many forms of divination have been developed over the years. (Extensive information on divination can be found in the L5R RPG 4th Edition supplement *The Book of Water*.) However, a very few rare individuals have been gifted with true prophetic ability, acting as a conduit for the will of Heaven to reveal the future.

The first such prophet recorded by history was Uikku, a mysterious child found in Phoenix lands who could quote the Tao despite being illiterate. But others like him followed from time to time, sometimes separated by many generations, sometimes clustering together during eras of strife and crisis. The origins of their gifts of prophecy have been a matter of considerable debate for the scholarly samurai of Rokugan. Some have linked the gift to Fire, the Element of inspiration and intelligence; others to Water, the Element of perception and divination. The truth is, however, that true divination and prophecy can come from a deep familiarity with any Element. This is exemplified by the Oracles, whose supernatural connection to the Elemental Dragons gives them tremendous insight into the working of the universe. Prophecy can therefore best be interpreted through the nature of the Void: the Void connects all Elements and sees the future, present, and past as one and the same, so the ability to see and predict the future is unavoidably linked with the Void.



There are two main theories on how the gift of prophecy occurs, championed by the two clans most closely associated with prophets: the Dragon Clan and the Phoenix Clan.

The shugenja and scholars of the Phoenix Clan have closely studied the phenomenon of prophecy ever since the appearance of Uikku. In fact, more prophets have been discovered within the ranks of the Phoenix than any other clan, giving them considerable experience with the topic. The Phoenix consider prophecy to simply be a higher level of affinity with the Elements, not dissimilar to the gift of the shugenja or the ishiken. Some mortals are simply blessed by the Fortunes with a superior understanding of the universe. Much in the same way that some can hear the speech of the kami or perceive the mysteries of the Void, prophets are able to understand how the tapestry of the universe unfolds, seeing the future through divinely granted visions. Supporting this theory is the fact many prophets are already shugenja before their gifts manifest, and they seem to appear most often within bloodlines

known for their magical talents, such as the Isawa. In light of this, the Phoenix consider prophets with a holy reverence, since in their view the appearance of a new prophet indicates both a sign of the Fortunes' favor and a warning of difficult times to come. Likewise, they view the bouts of madness which afflict many prophets as stemming from the difficulty of the human mind trying to take in the overwhelming influence of Heaven's wisdom. Luckily, the Phoenix are well equipped to deal with such things, thanks to both their own many prophets and their long experience with the Soul of Shiba (whose burden can also be difficult for the human mind to bear). Combined with their sense of spiritual authority toward the rest of the Empire, this often leads the Phoenix to request prophets found in other clans be given into their care, much in the way they also demand authority over those talented in the ways of Void magic.

Unsurprisingly, the Dragon attitude towards prophets is radically different from the Phoenix approach. Although the number of prophets coming from Dragon ranks is much





smaller than the Phoenix can boast, the Dragon have been influenced by the one who was possibly the most potent prophet ever to walk the land of Rokugan: the Kami Togashi himself. His visions drove the Dragon Clan's policies and especially its tendency to refrain from interacting with the Empire except when he felt it unavoidably necessary. Thus, while the Phoenix always seek greater understanding of prophecies and their meaning, the Dragon prefer to follow a prophecy unquestioningly, acting with the faith that the Heavens will guide them. At the same time, however, the emphasis the Dragon Clan puts on personal development and individual spirituality has led many Dragon to believe prophets are not blessed by the Fortunes at all, but rather are Enlightened individuals. In this view, potentially anyone could be a prophet if he or she were to develop a sufficient understanding of the world and a sufficient harmony with it. The Dragon like to point at the fantastic abilities of the monks of the Brotherhood of Shinsei and the wisdom of Shinsei himself as proof that prophecy does not necessarily require divine intervention to occur. Given their own links to the Brotherhood of Shinsei, the Dragon will frequently request the assistance of monks rather than the Phoenix when faced with issues related to prophecy... which of course annoys the Phoenix greatly.

The Impact of Prophets

Regardless of the origin of their visions, prophets almost always have a strong impact on Rokugan's affairs when they are revealed. As noted above, the Phoenix will often "request" (or more accurately, politely demand) the prophet be placed into their care. The other clans, however, tend to view such seers as extremely valuable assets. After all, while a prophet's visions will often concern more than a single clan, having the information before any rivals can allow a clan to prepare for and adapt to the future. All of this can lead to significant political bickering and sometimes more underhanded activities such as spying or even assassination.

Leaving aside the political impact, the revelation of a prophet has many other effects on the Empire. Pious individuals may be led to greater degrees of devotion, wishing to prepare their souls for impending trials. Temples and monasteries often see a surge in donations and attendance after the news of a prophet's existence is confirmed. The lower castes can be swept by religious fervor, sometimes resulting in unrest or even outright violence. Many Rokugani, samurai and commoner alike, will attempt to contact the prophet directly in hope of gaining answers to questions for themselves or their clan. Many prophets wind up fleeing into exile or seclusion to escape the disruptions their presence creates in society. For those unable to cope with either their visions or the social pressure which surrounds them, the Brotherhood of Shinsei offers both anonymity and a welcome refuge, and many prophets hide themselves within the monastic ranks to avoid further scrutiny.

False Prophets

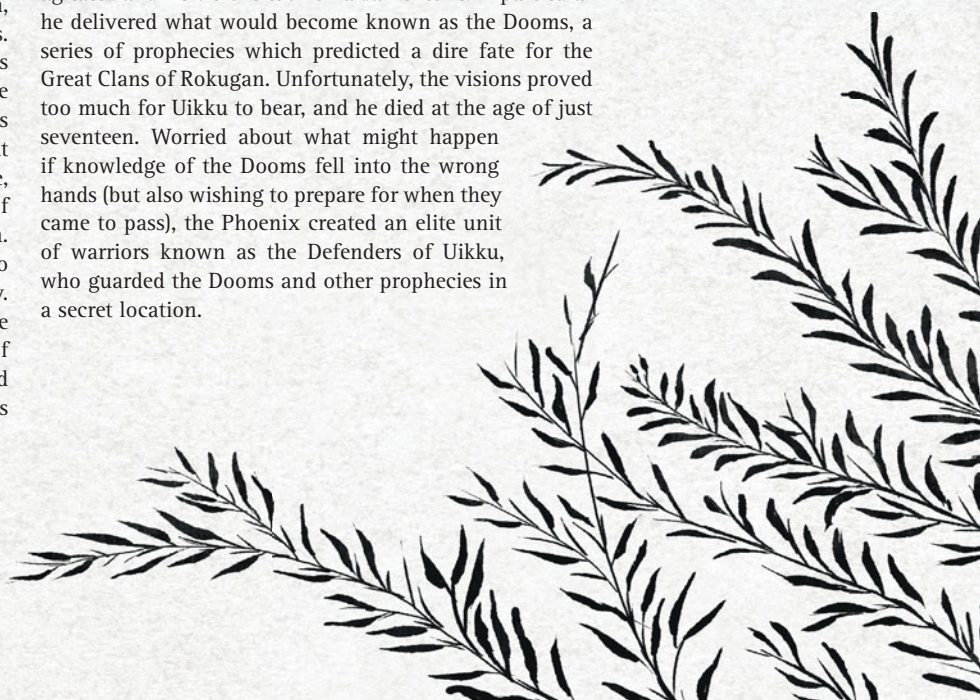
Unfortunately for the gullible and the weak, more than one person in Rokugan's history has noticed the influence exerted by prophets and decided to take advantage of that in dishonorable ways. After all, since no one can share a prophet's visions, it can be quite difficult to verify their authenticity – particularly if circumstances start aligning with the prophecies. False prophets can sometimes cause quite a bit of harm before they are unmasked, not the least of which is the general feeling of distrust they cast over other prophets (and the religious caste in general).

In some ways even more dangerous are those persons who genuinely believe they are prophets, either through self-delusion or outright madness. Their sense of confidence makes them more likely to attract followers, which can lead to outbreaks of heresy or violent social unrest.

The most heinous form of false prophecy, of course, comes from the eternal enemy of Rokugan: the Shadowlands. Armed with the supernatural clairvoyance which sometimes comes with the Taint, some of the Lost can reveal just enough of the truth about the future to trick others into corruption. Needless to say, those Tainted prophets are reviled when they are uncovered, but since there are always those desperate enough to seek help wherever they can find it, such false voices will doubtless continue to appear.

UIKKU, THE BOY

Uikku was both the first and the most iconic prophet ever found in Rokugan. He was discovered as a young boy on an empty plain of the Phoenix lands, far from any settlement. Uikku's description did not match any lost child in the area, and his origin remains unknown. However, it quickly became clear that the boy was more than he appeared, for he was able to quote entire passages of the Tao despite being illiterate and apparently lacking any real ability to talk normally. Soon his prophetic gifts manifested, and his strange words were carefully recorded by the Phoenix. As he aged, he became increasingly agitated and his visions took on a darker tone. In particular he delivered what would become known as the Dooms, a series of prophecies which predicted a dire fate for the Great Clans of Rokugan. Unfortunately, the visions proved too much for Uikku to bear, and he died at the age of just seventeen. Worried about what might happen if knowledge of the Dooms fell into the wrong hands (but also wishing to prepare for when they came to pass), the Phoenix created an elite unit of warriors known as the Defenders of Uikku, who guarded the Dooms and other prophecies in a secret location.





In the twelfth century, it is generally believed that the Dooms came true during the Clan Wars. However, certain scholars later theorized that the Dooms have acquired a form of life of their own and will continue to plague the clans until Rokugan is no more. (For more information on the Dooms, see the L5R 4th Edition supplement *The Great Clans*, page 94.)

JOKICHI, THE RONIN

In the early years of the seventh century, a relatively peaceful time for most of Rokugan, a ronin named Jokichi began claiming to have received prophetic visions. He spoke of the return of Shinsei to Rokugan and of a Second Day of Thunder, and called for all clans to abandon their warlike ways and purify themselves spiritually. Although his message received a mixed reception in the Empire, Jokichi had enough charisma that large numbers joined his cause, often retiring from their lives as samurai to prepare themselves for the return of Shinsei. Of course, this return never came to pass in the seventh century, and Jokichi eventually disappeared, leaving no trace behind. It was generally assumed he had just been a false prophet looking for power, and his followers gradually dispersed. Some say he was a pawn of the Scorpion, for many of his followers had come from the Crane Clan, which found itself weakened in the aftermath of his activities. In modern times, the story of Jokichi is regarded with irony, for the heir of Shinsei did indeed return to Rokugan and a Second Day of Thunder truly came to pass – albeit several centuries later than Jokichi had predicted. The truth about Jokichi – whether he was a fraud or a genuine visionary – is unknown, and is likely to remain so.

ISAWA NORIKAZU

"In the dark the shadows wait, the winds of war rise beneath the bloody hands of the living, and nothing can save us. Only nothing, ever nothing... nothing and nothing alone."

Originally a minor member of the Isawa family, Norikazu did not attract the attention of his peers, being a man of small stature and moderate skill. He did, however, attract the attention of the Oracle of Fire at his gempukku, and his magical talents blossomed after that. Norikazu's fate took a tragic turn when he came back from an extended trip outside Phoenix lands and met Isawa Ujina, the former Master of Void whose encounters with the Lying Darkness had turned him into the first of the strange creatures known as the Nameless Ones. It is unknown what Ujina did to Norikazu, but from then on the young man was plagued with severe fevers and intense visions, some of which offered glimpses at the future. Although the visions took a severe toll on his health and sanity, they allowed the Empire (and the Phoenix in particular) to prepare themselves for the War Against the Darkness. Norikazu was eventually chosen to be the Oracle of Fire, but held that station for only a short time before he died. However, he is remembered as a hero of the Phoenix for both his prophecies and his long struggle against madness.

AGASHA HAMANARI

Born a Dragon, Agasha Hamanari went on to become the second daimyo of his family in the Phoenix Clan, a rather awkward position to hold in that era. Possessed of a rare talent for Water magic, nurtured by training from the future Oracle of Water, Hamanari was a peaceful man whose visions never affected his sanity. Although he was quite potent as a prophet, Hamanari's reputation did not spread much outside of his clan, perhaps due to his self-effacing nature or the dubious reputation of the Agasha at the time. Hamanari's visions predicted the Rain of Blood and the third rise of Iuchiban, allowing the Phoenix to protect their own and save countless lives. Unfortunately, this made him a target to the Bloodspeakers, who manipulated Isawa Sezaru into executing him on suspicion of being a maho-tsukai. Despite this unfortunate end, Hamanari is considered one of the greatest daimyo the modern Agasha have had.

KITSUNE NARAKO

A young woman born in the Fox Clan in the middle of the twelfth century, Narako is notable for being one of the few prophets neither born into nor adopted by the Phoenix Clan. Her talents were initially kept secret, for she refused to be revealed until the time was right and her Clan Champion deferred to her wisdom. However, the Shadow Dragon had taken an interest in Narako, and made several attempts at capturing

or corrupting her – in the process, imperiling the entire Fox Clan. Ultimately, the intervention of the Mantis Clan saved the Fox (and resulted in the Kitsune swearing fealty to the Mantis) and Narako was saved by several young samurai. Her prophecies foreshadowed the arrival of the Destroyers and the terrible war which followed, allowing the Mantis to stand ready for that threat. After the Destroyer War ended, she withdrew from the public eye, remaining in seclusion despite several requests from the Phoenix to contact her. Some believe the prosperity the Mantis enjoyed after the Destroyer War was due in part to Narako's talents. Although the truth is for the Mantis alone to know, it is certain their fortunes greatly increased after the Colonies were founded.

KOKUJIN, THE FALSE PROPHET

The tattooed madmen known as Kokujin was one of the greatest dangers to plague the Empire during his lifetime, combining as he did the powers of the Dragon tattooed monks, the insights of Enlightened Madness, and the sinister Shadowlands Taint to create his own unique brand of corruption. While he led many schemes and served several masters in his attempts to acquire more power and insight, one of Kokujin's most dangerous aspects was when he posed as a prophet, acquiring many followers by preaching Enlightenment through violence. Although it remains unclear to what extent Kokujin actually possessed prophetic abilities, some of his insights did come to pass. Most worrying of all, however, was the fact that Kokujin mentioned having knowledge of Uikku's mysterious Sixth Doom, also known as the Doom of the Dragon. Since he was eventually murdered by one of his own remorseful followers, Kokujin's secrets died with him, to the relief of the Empire as a whole and the Dragon Clan in particular.











Sasuke leaned against his hoe and looked out wistfully toward the monastery that rested in the lee of the local keep. He knew the monks there spent each and every day meditating, studying the teachings of Shinsei, and offering their wisdom to the samurai within the town. It would be a joy to live such a life, he thought wistfully. To live as a monk was supposed to live.

The rap of an old man's cane to the back of his calf brought him out of his reverie. The wizened, smiling face of Keiji regarded him with only the slightest bit of sternness. "Now now, lad," he said, not unkindly, though his voice sounded like a gravel road crunching under the tread of many sandals. "The fields will not till themselves, will they? I'm sure our brothers can take care of themselves. Come. We have a garden to finish tilling, and the soil needs to be turned."

Sasuke nodded glumly and returned to his work, glancing over at Keiji from time to time. He felt the urge to speak up, but even at the age of ten he already knew it was best to keep his eyes on the actual task. "Master," he began.

"No, my boy," Keiji corrected. "It is the way of others to call one's teacher a master. It is not our way. Simply call me Keiji. A name has a use, you know."

"Keiji-sama," Sasuke began again, trying not to roll his eyes. That teaching always irritated him a little. "I do not understand why we are not with the other orders. You often speak of the needs of the people, of your worries about the harvest, that our lord might be too harsh on everyone. Why do we not join those who petition for more concessions? Did Shinsei not direct us to help guide our betters?"

The old monk chuckled. It was not the first time they had spoken of this. "They are well intentioned in their efforts," he said. "I think perhaps now is a poor time to try to whisper in our lord's ear. He has many who whisper there, and the voices of a few are easily drowned out in the rush of hot wind."

Sasuke frowned. The old man's remarks contained a mild jab at their lord that was both familiar and affectionate, but at the same time a little cutting. The boy had only recently joined the order and still remembered the intense fear the peasants always felt for samurai, the way they were always respectful in their public words just in case one might be listening. They said Scorpion had ears everywhere, after all. Who knew if one might not spring out of the blue?

"You are concerned, little Sasuke, but do not let your heart be troubled. The minds of men can be swayed by many things." Keiji kept his own eyes focused on his task, working the ground steadily, his aged skin cracked and darkened by toil and dirt. "The heart is strengthened when it feels its feet firmly planted upon the earth. It is softened when the winds whisper to it and tell it the things it wants to hear. It is refreshed when it drinks of cool waters and sees memories and glimpses of days gone by in its reflection. It is invigorated by the evening's fire and the possibilities it sees in the crackling flames. All things in heaven have their place, their time, and their methods. We are influencing our lord this very day."

Sasuke stopped, his hoe stuck in the ground, and stared incredulously at the old man. Keiji gave him a mild

look, and after a moment the boy resumed his toil. He did not speak, but the question was written all over his face... and after a time, Keiji answered him.

"Look to the peasants who toil with us on the other side of the field. There is Mara with her three young boys, her daughter tending to the mill. Did you see how their pace picked up when we began to work? They toil harder because we are here. Seeing us here with them, they feel renewed, for they know that they are not alone in their labors. We do not teach only with words, the whispering of the wind. We teach with something far more powerful. With ourselves."

Sasuke considered for a moment. "You mean... we teach by example, Keiji-sama?"

"Yes, little Sasuke... and no." The venerable monk knelt down and began to plant the seed potatoes. "We do offer an example, and that is a good and noble thing. But we teach by being. We are as Ebisu taught us, and in all things there is Enlightenment. In all things there is teaching, there is

growth, just like this potato. Its new life in the midst of hardship offers an example that inspires the people, but it also offers them a promise just by being what it is – life, growth, and potential. Do not aspire to be an example, Sasuke-san. You are already that to these people. Aspire to be, and in being, serving as what you are, you will change the world and those around you."

"Even hoeing a field, Keiji-sama?"

"Especially hoeing a field. Why, if we give our lord a bountiful harvest while other lands face famine, I expect he will be moved to compassion far better than if we just asked." The old man wheezed a short laugh. "Come, enough being idle. As I said, the potatoes won't plant themselves. Ebisu waits for no man."

Sasuke sighed and continued. He clearly had a lot to learn about politics if a hoe could actually be a courtly tool. Still, the day's labor did seem a little more bearable.

By winter, when their lord announced he would ease the next year's taxes, Sasuke knew he would never question Keiji again.



The Courtly Philosophy of Void

Of all of the Elements, Void is generally considered by the uninitiated to be the least involved in the courtly world and its philosophies. This should come as little surprise, given how poorly the Element of Void is understood by most of the Rokugani population. Most people consider the Void to be the domain of monks and priests, those who wield the power of the kami. Those who are more educated often consider Void to be the purview of the Isawa *Ishiken*. The typical Rokugani views the Void as something distant and mysterious, not something for the common man and certainly not something relevant to a courtier's work.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Void is the least-followed path in the courts, but it does exist, found amongst a limited body of people within a few clans. Air and Water predominate as courtly schools of thought, and most of the clans who follow at least some aspect of Void in politics also adhere to those philosophies as well. Perhaps the best way to understand the Void in its connection with courtly teachings is to first understand Void within its actual relationship to the other four Elements. Void is the weave that binds together the Elements and defines each of them, yet it has no true identity of its own – it is the most malleable of concepts and at the same time the least established of them. This “all and yet nothing” concept of Void is the source of the courtly philosophies on the subject. Indeed, those schools which adhere to a philosophy of Void are easily confused with ‘universalists’ or dabblers in the philosophies of all Elements; they seem to toy with all courtly teachings almost equally.

There is a sense of truth in this, in that there is always a certain ‘dabbling’ aspect to the Void philosophy regarding the courts, but to dwell on this point would be to miss the true value of the Void in political philosophy. The schools which embrace Void do not believe one should merely study little fragments of rival schools; rather, they are firm in the conviction that all schools of thought are ultimately equal and intrinsically linked. Only by embracing the wholeness of all political approaches can true harmony of mind and person be achieved. This harmony is the ultimate goal of the courtiers who follow the Void approach. To the practitioner of Void within the courts, the perspective of the Shosuro is just as valid as the perspective of the Hida, the perspective of the Kitsuki, or even the perspective of the occasional unpredictable Ise Zumi found within the courts. There are times and places where one must be as blunt as a Yoritomo to accomplish one's goals, and other times when one must be as subtle and delicate as a Doji.

The Void viewpoint regards the constant rivalries between courtly schools of thought – and the animosity such rivalries breed – as a great tragedy. Of course, it is in the nature of samurai to always hold their own mentors' teachings in the highest regard, and rivalries are the natural outgrowth of conflicts between clans... but the effect of these customs is that the courtly schools perpetually

denigrate each other, whereas the scholars of Void see each school as carrying great strengths, none of which (however unorthodox) are inherently ‘wrong’ or ‘invalid.’ In extreme cases, even borderline heretical teachings such as those of the Spider Clan are not entirely viewed with distaste, although they are approached with a very careful eye. The corrupting influence of the Taint may be an inherent evil, but the Spider schools' teachings regarding sin and vice are not without merit, however distasteful they may be to most ‘proper’ Rokugani. Even these methods, after all, reflect a reality within the spirit of mankind, and thus are as much a part of the Void as anything else.

For the schools of the Void, there are only a few specific teachings directly related to the Element itself – primarily just a constant attempt to maintain harmony of mind and body. Rather, the all-is-one aspect of Void philosophy is embraced to draw together all the differing philosophies of the Elements. Conversely, the Void schools reject an excessive reliance on any one Element; it is folly, they say, to embrace the Air without having one's feet planted firmly on the Earth, for example. In the Void approach, every Element draws upon the others in a unified wholeness, and every set of teachings is inherently valuable and can be used to at least some extent, if for nothing else than to understand the methodologies and approaches of others. Void also shares a common trait with the courtly schools of Water in that it embraces the notion of adaptability, but it takes this Water-inspired teaching to a far more significant level, preferring to constantly make changes in methodologies, approaches, and even techniques whenever the situation warrants it.

Void-focused political agents may sometimes be students of other notable courtly schools of thought, but more commonly they come from backgrounds which are not generally considered “court-centered” at all. While it is possible for more conventionally trained courtiers to embrace the Void philosophy, they tend to be unique minorities rather than the main players on the stage. The vast majority of politically minded and Void-centered courtiers are instead drawn from the ranks of shugenja, monastic orders, and mystical groups of all sorts – though usually not from the *ishiken*. (In this regard, the views of the common people about Void are at least somewhat correct: it is these sorts of individuals, trained in the spiritual and theological aspects of the Void, who are most likely to understand its applicability to the courts.)

Those who espouse the teachings of Void as their principle courtly method tend to develop a broader base of understanding of the world around them, seeking any form of teaching which might help them to draw upon all the Elements and avoid being locked perpetually into the limited cycles of their own clan's teachings. Even among those who are not themselves monks, periods of monastic study and contemplation are not uncommon. Those with the ability to do so often pursue the study of the mysterious kiho in order to further broaden their horizons and find new ways to comprehend to world around them. Others study the martial arts, the path of the artisan or craftsman, or





any other divergent way of expanding their knowledge and deepening their spiritual and physical understanding of the world. Such studies may seem wholly unrelated to the ways of court, but in the view of Void philosophers, the connection between all things means any field of study is useful to any other.

A side effect of these tendencies among courtiers of the Void is that they are among the most eclectic of all courtly students. Very few of them are 'typical' examples of their particular clan or field of endeavor. This should not be surprising, given the changeable nature of the Void; even the *ishiken*, who pursue a focused study of the Void as an Element, rarely seem to be consistent in their behavior and personality. Some courtiers might view this unpredictability as an advantage to be nurtured, since it allows the person to be misunderstood or underestimated more easily, but to those of the Void this is merely a natural reflection of their approach to the world. Uniqueness – considered almost scandalous among the followers of Air, Earth, Fire, and Water – is a normal condition for them.

Those who espouse the ways of the Void firmly entrench themselves in Shinsei's dictum that each person must seek Enlightenment in his own way. Similarly, each Void courtier approaches the courts of the Empire in his own way. Teachings are merely guideposts, reflections of how their sensei found their way, and are not necessarily the solution for every problem – in fact, they may become a crutch, weakening one's focus and impeding more than they aid. For the Void student, specialization or focused study are rejected in favor of a broad approach to court and indeed to life, embracing the wholeness of one's being. It is as important to be oneself as it is to be one's lord's servant, because one must know oneself fully in order to utilize all the gifts and knowledge one possesses – and thereby be the best possible tool for one's lord.

The Way of the Void is in many ways the most strenuous and difficult of the five Elements to uphold in the court, for it represents a mastery of a great breadth of topics,

requiring a sort of dedication that most of the other courtier philosophies do not. This is not to say these schools are not dedicated to their courtly duty, but rather that the Way of the Void is one in which the student seeks mastery for its own sake, completion for no other reason than attaining the state of completion. Other schools seek to actively and pragmatically utilize what is placed before them, while the Way of the Void believes success may be a goal but one that is tangential to wholeness. This requires a dedication that is beyond the time, talent, or resources of most people. Many have thought they would follow the path of Void for their own betterment, only to be forced to put it aside for more practical concerns. True masters of the Void path are thus not only rare but decidedly eccentric, difficult for most people to understand and predict. They are very difficult to outright oppose, for they seem to have somehow ascended beyond the petty limitations of normal men and cannot be predicted or manipulated in the same manner as others. Of course, this difficulty is further enhanced by the psychological intimidation of the widespread belief that masters of the way of Void are on the road to enlightenment.

All this being said, those who follow the way of Void in court are ultimately so diverse and unique that it is difficult to say more about them. A person cannot master the Void of the courts while holding to a rigid structure or a strict path, whether that path be of Air, Earth, Fire, or Water. One must embrace all of them at once to be of the Void, and this sort of transcendence is the ultimate goal of any samurai who pursue the path of Void, whether in the court or elsewhere.

As a signifier of how diverse the path of Void can truly be, consider three examples of famous Void courtiers – fittingly, two of whom are not even human: Ide Tadaji, the ratling known as K'Mee, and the Naga called the Dashmar.

Ide Tadaji was a beacon of peace in even the most chaotic times. When the old courtier would merely sit in a room, the aura of his serene nature would flow out to everyone present, making conflict difficult to pursue.

However, while this peaceful character drew from his own training in the Ide school, he was also a man who saw value in Scorpion teachings, in the use of a cunning mind to help keep the peace through subtle manipulation. Although he never undertook formal training among the Shosuro, their influence was clearly visible in his methods to those who knew where to look. His presence in the courts was palpable but indefinable, almost like a force of nature, and few dared to actively oppose him.

The Dashmar, the Naga emissary to the Empire during the Clan Wars era, was arguably one of the most pro-active courtiers of the Void despite lacking a direct connection to it as a human understood it. Beyond even the power of the Akasha which all Naga could draw from, the Dashmar sought to broaden his mind and the minds of his disciples through the perspective of other races. In seeking out peace and mutual aid with the human world, he taught his own people the need to better understand humans, a stance which many Naga had difficulty respecting.



K'Mee represented in many ways the unique monastic approach toward the courtly arts, as well as the reality that Enlightenment itself is a potent political tool. K'Mee was a singular oddity in the courts of Rokugan, a ratling invited not once but several times to the Imperial Winter Court itself. She merged the teachings of Shinsei with her own unique understanding as a Nezumi and her unusually perceptive mind to act and react in ways none would expect – yet at the same time winning over some of the most hard-bitten samurai in Rokugan. Many came to believe she had attained Enlightenment, including the Brotherhood of Shinsei, which took the unprecedented step of allowing her to take vows as a monk. She eventually became a personal aide to the head of the Shinseist orders, a position which was also a political tool since it forced others to heed her words no matter how odd and out of place she might otherwise have seemed.

Groups Who Embrace the Void in Court

Unlike the other Elemental philosophies in the courts, the path of Void is not uniquely claimed by entire families, but instead is found in many different groups and individuals. However, the following are those most likely to pursue it.

THE MONASTIC ORDERS

The Brotherhood of Shinsei is probably the chief group among all those who aspire to be practitioners of the Void within the courts. Although the monastic orders usually hold aloof from politics, when they do intervene they can be a force to be reckoned with. This may seem odd, since they do not carry the sort of obvious political authority or weight of a samurai, and indeed technically they do not even have holdings of their own – most religious structures are considered to be under the supervision of Imperial authority, with the remainder administered by the clans. Thus monks cannot negotiate over borders or bargain for control of lands or temples, although in practice monastic authority over the Empire's temples and shrines is never truly questioned. However, the true power base of the Brotherhood is not lands or strongholds at all. They do not rely on wealth or armies for influence, or even on knowledge or mystical power – their libraries are secondary to those of the Dragon and Lion, while their supernatural gifts are inferior to those of the Phoenix. Nor do they possess the political networks and hoarded secrets of the Otomo, Crane, or Scorpion. They cannot even match the lands of a Minor Clan. On the surface they should not be able to so much as hold a candle to the political might of the Great Clans... yet there is not a force in the courts that would dare to outright oppose the Brotherhood as a body, not even the Otomo bureaucracy itself.

The source of the Brotherhood's political authority is their authority in religious matters and the respect which all Rokugani show them – not just samurai (both buke and kuge) but also the heimin and even the eta. This power is not openly expressed, but rather simply an unspoken understanding between the monks and the rest of Rokugan. Unlike the sort of implied relationship and assumed power



that is frequently displayed by the Otomo family, this respect has remained largely stable over the course of centuries, even in those rare times (such as the Heresy of the Five Rings) when it has been abused.

Ultimately, more than anything else, monks have political influence within the courts because they have the ears of samurai. As the embodiments of Shinsei's teachings, they are seen as voices of wisdom whose insights can help to clarify confusing or contentious topics. Moreover, the Brotherhood is almost universally held to be the only organization where persons may pursue and attain Enlightenment; the presence of Enlightened individuals, while rare, has nonetheless led all samurai to pay great heed to the words of even the most average low-ranking member of the monastic orders. This is even somewhat true among the Lion, who are widely known for eschewing the teachings of Shinsei in favor of Akodo's ways, because even in the Lion lands there are hundreds of monks tending and keeping the countless shrines and temples to the ancestors and the Fortunes. Thus, regardless of how a specific clan might view the teachings of Shinsei, monastic orders are always accorded respect and monks can always find the ears of the daimyo.

Monks who wish to use their authority must, nonetheless, walk a very thin and careful line due to their non-samurai status. The courtly path of Void, with its emphasis on embracing all things and using all methods, suits them well. In this regard, the Brotherhood is not averse to sending representatives who are formerly samurai, retired from the Great Clans. While life-long members of the monastic orders will sometimes seek out the courts because of specific interests or unique gifts, it is primarily these former samurai who can call on their past experiences and knowledge who become courtly advisors. However, while the Brotherhood often selects its court representatives from retirees of the clans' political hierarchy, it also seeks to purge any specific political training and techniques from these individuals through rigorous discipline and training. (This





is a standard aspect of the life of a retired samurai – the Brotherhood expects such men and women to actively give up their former practices in order to embrace their “new life” as monks.) It is almost unheard-of for a samurai of notable political skill to retire and then immediately move on to conduct political machinations for the Brotherhood – the monastic orders believe that such an approach is spiritually dangerous and threatens the person’s ability to give up the things of this world and search for Enlightenment. Such an individual would certainly not be fit to represent the interests, ideals, or teachings of the Brotherhood. Instead, former courtiers or courtly-focused individuals spend at least a few years – sometimes a decade or more – reconsidering their lives, studying the ways of Shinsei, and beginning to harmonize themselves with the whole of the Empire. They divorce themselves from who they once were... not to the point where they truly forget the things they once did, but rather so they can place their former lives in perspective and approach the Void’s wholeness of spirit. This process is rarely immediate; these monks are only allowed to become courtly advisors once their seniors feel they have displayed a true forsaking of the past and begun

on the path to Enlightenment, rather than merely aping the words and practices of others.

All this being said, courtiers of the Brotherhood do still reflect some aspects of their former lives. While they may not use the techniques they relied upon before, they cannot truly forget everything that they were. However, what they do demonstrate is the ability to look beyond those boundaries, to embrace a broadened wholeness that epitomizes the courtly path of Void. When they speak amongst themselves, they do not discuss the experiences in their former lives (a topic that is usually considered somewhat taboo among monks) but rather their current perspectives and how they view the behavior of others. Glimmers of the people they once were can still be seen, shared between each other in a sort of gestalt drawn upon by the whole of the Brotherhood. Uniqueness of identity is favored, but only once the monk has put aside his former life in order to embrace Shinsei and enter the next stage of existence. After all, if a courtier truly wished to remain who he once was, he could have become a sensei or otherwise remained within his clan.

THE PHOENIX CLAN

One might expect that the *ishiken* would be the primary Phoenix political authority with ties to the Void, by simple virtue of their close connection to the Element itself. However, this is not the case. Very few *ishiken* concern themselves with courtly matters, and almost all of them avoid making any appearance in the courts at all. Their constant studies of the deep mysteries of the Void leave many of them more than a touch unhinged, and their odd behaviors are not helpful to the courtly process. Consequently, those Phoenix who embrace the Void as a philosophy of court seldom come from the *ishiken*; instead, they are usually more “mainstream” Isawa shugenja or mystics from the secretive order known as the Henshin (the latter appearing outwardly to be monastic scholars).

The Henshin are a secretive group, their true nature concealed not just from the Empire but for most of history from the rest of the Phoenix Clan as well. It was not until after the Clan Wars in the early twelfth century that some of their true nature emerged. However, despite the animosity their secrecy bred with the rest of the clan, the Henshin were always seen as a monastic and scholarly order which could serve effectively in the courts. Even after some of the reality of their nature became more evident, they remained a useful asset separate from the more conventional historians and loremasters of the Asako family.

Where the Asako family’s historians demonstrate a mastery of the courtly philosophy of Fire, a desire to perfect the full capacity of the intellect in the course of courtly life, the Henshin are focused more upon manipulating and shaping the universe around them in all ways, ultimately seeking to dwell in perfect spiritual harmony with that universe. Their entire perspective is one of a mysterious and holistic outlook on creation, trying to understand and solve the underlying mysteries and riddles of the Elements – a



quintessential Void outlook. Those who are more adept at maintaining the secrecy of their methods have long felt that the courtly world is a perfect avenue for them to study the flow of the Elements, for nowhere could all five of them be seen quite so clearly without the need for armed conflict.

The Henshin often pose as spiritual advisers, functioning in a similar fashion to those from the Brotherhood of Shinsei. Indeed, outsiders usually cannot tell much difference, since the Henshin – though students of the secret Path of Man – fully embrace the teachings of Shinsei and draw on the Tao regularly when offering their counsel. However, in contrast to monks, the Henshin also use the secret tricks of their school to better comprehend the courtly society around them.

Very few of the low-ranking *Michibiku* (students of the Path of Man not yet at the point of the Mystery of Fate) are sent to the courts. Only the highest ranking *Michibiku* are given such duties, in part to ensure secrecy about their techniques. Instead, courtly Henshin are usually particularly skilled and unique *Fushihai*, seeking to take their studies to the next stage on the way to apotheosis and the final ascension toward divinity. However, one thing usually shared in common by all the *Michibiku* and *Fushihai* sent out to the courts is that they are particularly skilled in maintaining control of their emotions and intentions. This is both to make sure they do not accidentally give up the Henshin Order's secrets and also because such self-control is important for anyone who spends time in the courts speaking with others. Many of them are also trained in those *kiho* which are well suited to the study of other people, or have personal gifts suited to the courtly world, such as particularly melodious voice or a knack for making friends. These allow them to avoid relying too much on their Riddles and Mysteries in public.

Beyond the Henshin, other the Phoenix have demonstrated at times a certain gift for the way of the Void in the courts. These are usually *Isawa* (or later, *Agasha*) *shugenja* of a more generalist nature, the sort who seek to master all Elements rather than focusing on one – those who believe all the Elements have strengths which should be mastered and developed. Taking a page from the *Asahina Family's Mappers of the Heart*, another enigmatic order seeking to study the wholeness of the court, these *Isawa* maintain their practice as magical generalists and observe the full influence of all the Elements within the courts. Generally, such persons are sent out as lesser aides and advisors to prominent diplomats, and their overall influence is modest at best.

THE DRAGON CLAN

The Dragon inherently typify the indefinable and ever-changeable nature of the Void through their eccentric nature and through the organization (if such a term can truly be used to describe them) known as the *Ise Zumi*. While many Dragon samurai seek mastery of one aspect or another of the Void, the *Ise Zumi* are the only group which truly espouses the Void as a philosophy for relating to other people... and only if they feel like doing so.

The *Ise Zumi* are by their very nature naturally attuned to the Void, far more so than most other schools and certainly more so than any courtly schools. They share a sort of love and fascination for knowledge and teachings of all sorts, and worldly ones gleefully study many different philosophies with relative ease, even if they do not move past dabbling in such arts. Their perspective is a naturally broad one, but one that always is focused through the lens of their strange nature and their individual perspectives. An *Ise Zumi* is in many ways a force of nature, a man or woman who can neither be controlled nor understood. The majority of the tattooed order tends to remain far up in the mountains – blessedly so, from the viewpoints of many court hosts. However, those eccentric *Ise Zumi* who do feel a call to more worldly activities are almost chronically drawn to court environments, seeing these hives of people as particularly good places to practice their arts, share their wisdom with the world, and seek Enlightenment through unusual methods.

This can be frustrating or even infuriating to court hosts and provincial lords, for the social status of *Ise Zumi* is in some ways even more uncertain than the average Brotherhood monk. Other mystical or pseudo-monastic groups within the Great Clans are treated as normal samurai and often hold lands or otherwise fulfill samurai roles; *Ise Zumi*, however, are part of a Great Clan and yet very rarely behave like members of the samurai caste at all. Their dubious status is further complicated by the fact that a significant number of them were not originally members of the Dragon Clan – in a few cases not even born as samurai. (Throughout history there are countless examples of *Rokugani* from all ranks of life who feel a unique calling, enter the mountains of the Dragon, and emerge years later covered in tattoos and seemingly completely different from who and what they once were.) Of course, the Dragon themselves treat all *Ise Zumi* the same, regardless of their origins, which only adds further confusion. All of this makes the *Ise Zumi* politically infuriating figures: they are Dragon, treated to some extent as samurai by other Dragon, yet they behave more like eccentric monks, traveling freely, disregarding convention, interfering in others' lands and affairs, and beloved by the peasants.





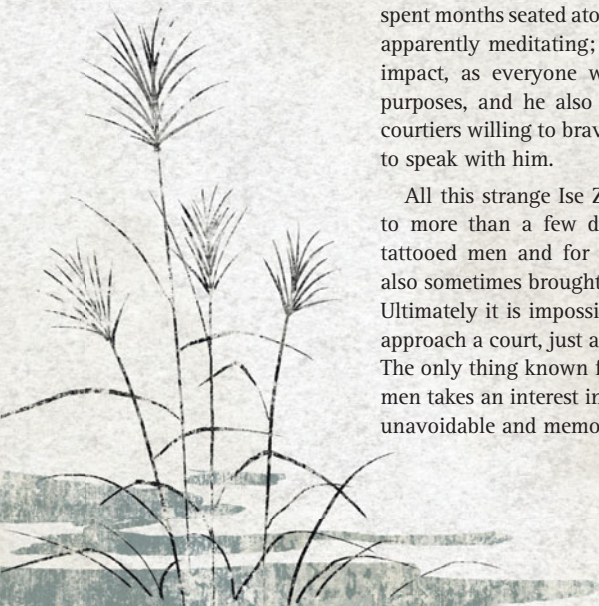
Thus, if any single group in the courts could be said to reflect the uniqueness of individuals touched by the Void, it is the Togashi. Some may still use techniques they once knew in a former life as a clan samurai. All wear a wide assortment of strange and surreal tattoos, some of which are not even chronicled and are instead unique gifts found only once or twice in history. Both Kiho and kata of all sorts are found among them, and every single Ise Zumi has unique personal gifts and a unique attitude to the world. Many of the tattooed men who take up residence in the courts are not politically savvy by any normal standard – indeed the famous Togashi Mitsu, who made appearances in major courts through the early twelfth century, was known for attending political events bare-chested and grinning, an inexplicable anomaly who others tried desperately to understand. Another famous instance was an Ise Zumi who spent months seated atop the roof of a Crane daimyo's castle, apparently meditating; his simple presence had significant impact, as everyone wondered about his intentions and purposes, and he also exerted influence through the few courtiers willing to brave the elements and walk on the roof to speak with him.

All this strange Ise Zumi behavior in the courts has led to more than a few deaths over the years, both for the tattooed men and for those they offend; however, it has also sometimes brought great wisdom where it was needed. Ultimately it is impossible to predict how an Ise Zumi will approach a court, just as it is impossible to predict the Void. The only thing known for sure is that if one of the tattooed men takes an interest in the court, his presence will be both unavoidable and memorable.

THE ASAHINA FAMILY

Of the Empire's many shugenja families, few (aside from the Isawa) try to understand the world from the perspective of more than one Element. The Moshi make some attempts, but are deeply entrenched in their study and love for Lady Amaterasu and her successors. The Asahina, however, possess a unique perspective derived from the peculiar history of their family. While the founder of their family, Isawa Asahina, was a master of Air, he also had a particularly potent gift for Fire magic as well; when he first rose to the Elemental Council, he could have claimed the mantle for either Element, but chose Air. Once he left the Phoenix Clan to become the founder of the Crane Clan's Asahina family (an event described in the L5R 4th Edition supplement *The Great Clans*, page 47), that family took up a tradition of Air magic... but there has always been a secondary aspect of studying not only Fire but all the Elements. This embrace of multiple Elements makes them a more Void-oriented school than many (although the Isawa are still the most notable example of such), and this approach is also seen in their political attitude.

The Asahina are by no means the most prominent political arm of the Crane; in fact, they are arguably the least important of all Crane families in terms of addressing political concerns. The Daidoji maintain the wealth and economic well-being of the clan (as did the Yasuki before them), while the Doji and Kakita are the unquestioned masters of Crane courtly affairs. Yet even the Asahina make their presence felt occasionally, if usually in far more subtle ways than their kin. Theirs is a family that places an ideal above all others, an ideal which entails many aspects of the



Void philosophy: they are promoters of peace, tranquility, harmony, and enlightenment. They study all the Elements in order to draw from each of these in support of this harmonious goal. The path of Air is valued among them because it can sway the hearts of men towards peace far more effectively than the other Elements, but they do not limit themselves solely to the Air philosophy; instead, their practices seek to draw upon all the Elements and the entirety of the human experience to spread peace and tranquility in all of their encounters.

The rare Asahina courtiers are generally adjuncts or spiritual advisors to trained diplomats from the Doji or Kakita. They are favored in situations where tensions are extremely high but not yet beyond the point of recovery. Their unique knack for advancing the path of peace and tranquility is one the Crane families have found valuable in such especially tense negotiations. Indeed, sometimes the mere presence of an Asahina shugenja is enough to calm things down.

THE NAGA

Considering that they have no actual connection to the Void as humans understand it, the Naga are certainly an unusual group to consider as following the courtly 'path of Void.' However, many Rokugani have argued that the Naga race's collective soul, the Akasha, is itself a form of the Void that the entire species understands completely. This joined and unified connection between an entire people, spanning millennia of history, allows them to gain the insights of all the Elements. If this is not the path of Void, it is certainly a very similar thing.

The most prominent political force among the Naga is the order known as Vedics. The Vedics (and especially the disciples of the one called the Dashmar) draw upon the "hive mind" of the Akasha far more deeply than their brethren. By calling on the teachings, understandings, and experience of all past Naga, they embrace an extremely broad perspective, seeing the world through countless viewpoints at once – an approach which Rokugani would recognize as Void-influenced.

The disciples of the Dashmar draw on that famous Naga's unique perspective on the so-called 'Human Dilemma.' Having awoken to find the world populated by humanity and changed beyond anything they could have conceived, the Dashmar sought to further broaden his peoples' perspectives by forging connections to the human world through study, diplomacy, and regular contact. While his teachings were not universally embraced by the Naga as a people, a loyal body of devoted followers continued his traditions after his death, especially during those periods that the Naga remained awake and active in the world.

All this being said, the Naga as a people have struggled with the human concept of the Void as part of their more general struggles to deal with humanity. While individuals such as the Dashmar and the Mara were able to forge successful relationships with human beings, these teachings have been difficult for the Naga race to accept. They are a stubborn, proud, and powerful people who once ruled almost uncontested over a world that is now held by others. To most of them, humanity will never be more than a race of interlopers dwelling on what was once their own land.

The followers of the Dashmar (and the Vedics in general) continue to pursue a more universalist approach, hoping to aid the Naga to develop as a people in the world that now surrounds them. It remains to be seen whether this approach will succeed, especially since the Naga spend so much of their existence sleeping.

Courtly Organizations of the Void

Although this section refers to "organizations," in truth what is really being described here is an assortment of philosophies. In two cases this has led to the development of a Technique, but these Techniques are taught and spread through personal instruction and example rather than in formal dojo.

PHOENIX CLAN: THE WAY OF THE WORLD

The self-styled "Way of the World" is a subset of the Henshin order's philosophy. Its membership is comprised entirely of Fushihai who have not achieved outright apotheosis and instead have chosen – for whatever reason – to remain in the mortal world and develop their courtly arts. They are an obscure group within the Phoenix Clan, seldom numbering more than ten or fifteen at a time, and each new member is personally recruited by predecessors within the group.

One might ask why such a group would come into existence from a mystical order like the Henshin, focused as they are on mastering the Mystery of Fate. The answer derives from the Path of Man itself. As figures such as Asako Oyo have shown time and time again, divergence from the true Path of Man can lead to madness or outright evil. Deviation from Asako's teachings is treated as verging on blasphemous and can result in expulsion from the order. No variations in the order's methods is permitted until a student attains mastery and is inducted into the Fushihai





ranks. Only them, after the final secrets have been revealed, is it considered safe for the Fushihai to begin separating themselves from the norm.

Fushihai who enter the so-called “Way of the World” view themselves as spreading wisdom into the mundane world of the court, like a Fortune visiting the mortal realm to help others along the true path. Though they are still bound to maintain the secrecy of their order, they are far more free with the knowledge they share, and believe that much like Fortunes who share their blessings with the world, they are helping others to attain a higher level of education and spiritual growth. And while they do not share the Path of Man with the uninitiated, they seek to build a path to Enlightenment for many who might otherwise never achieve such growth.

The group is a shared ideology rather than a formalized organization; its members usually know each other by name and may well have worked alongside each other for decades. They are viewed with a mixture of respect and concern by their fellow Fushihai, who remain unsure of the movement’s merits and whether or not its teachings might ultimately lead to spiritual risk (for the members or their students). However, in the centuries since its inception no Fushihai is known to have fallen off the Path due to embracing the “Way of the World,” and by the twelfth century questions about the wisdom of the “Way” have become more academic than practical.

The members of the movement usually gather every few years, assembling in remote corners of temples or libraries away from prying eyes. There they share the stories of their actions and of the souls they have aided (each in their own way) toward Enlightenment. Of course, to the students of the Path of Man, any other form of Enlightenment is a lesser achievement, but they do not question the value of aiding others even to a partial understanding of the universe. After all, an Enlightened soul may well be reborn into the Henshin order in its next life.

The members of this small body usually appear to others in the courts to be little more than aged monastic advisers, perhaps not even directly associated with the Phoenix Clan itself – although their courtly work aids the Phoenix, it usually does so only in a secondary fashion. Quite a few of them have lived for long enough that identifying themselves by their birth names brings potential risks, so

they often pose as simple Brotherhood monks in order to avoid excessive scrutiny. Only a few serve openly as members of their clan, and the names by which they identify change over the course of time. These few usually serve as personal advisers to key Phoenix diplomats, voices of age and wisdom that can be drawn upon at need.

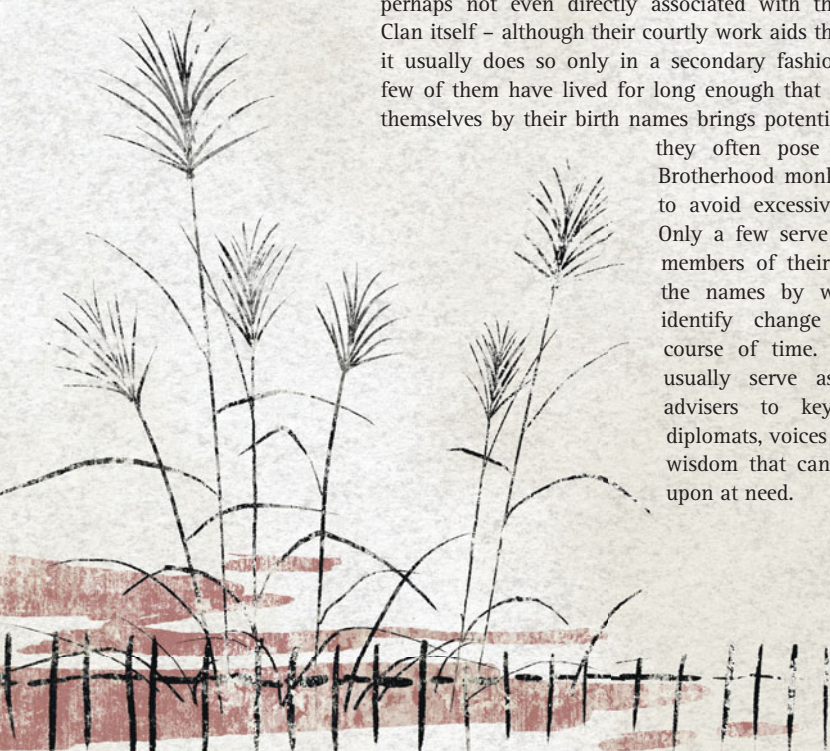
THE HEART OF TOGASHI

The name “Heart of Togashi” is not actually used by the Ise Zumi who belong to this organization – indeed, the tattooed men would consider such a name to almost border on being silly. They do recognize themselves as being a different group from other Ise Zumi and pursuing their own studies, but at the same time they do not find any particular need to formally organize themselves or to affiliate in any special fashion. To them, what they do is a calling, just as a “normal” Ise Zumi’s life is a calling.

These Ise Zumi are more ‘worldly’ than the average tattooed man, although not so much in rejecting asceticism or the pleasures of the world as in their fascination with the courtly world. Where other Ise Zumi pursue the rigors of martial training or endless meditation, the Heart of Togashi seek to apply the mystical powers of their tattoos to the social world. Thus, almost the entire membership of this small body of eccentrics can be found out in the broader Empire, serving as advisers, helping to build bridges (figuratively and sometimes literally), and conversing with samurai, commoner, and eta alike. Despite their limited numbers they are far more “visible” than the average Ise Zumi, but few outside of the Togashi family can tell the difference between them and their brethren. Most Rokugani are unaware that any differences in the Ise Zumi exist at all, not surprising given that most samurai cannot even understand the teachings or behavior of the tattooed men, much less their divisions.

Many of the Heart spend almost no time in the High House of Light, a sharp contrast with the rest of the Togashi. The rest of the family does not find this troubling, and on the rare occasions they are asked about it, the Ise Zumi reply: “The Heart knows what it knows, and it beats by its own will.” The term “Heart of Togashi” was not coined until the twelfth century, when a particularly obsessive Kitsuki sought to catalogue the full extent of the Ise Zumi tattooed orders – a task made all the more challenging by the emergence of the Hoshi and Hitomi families. His effort was generally considered a failure and a waste of a talented mind, but it nevertheless detected within the Ise Zumi order a number of subtle variations in teachings (such as the Pugilists). The Kitsuki surmised that the “Heart of Togashi” were those touched by Togashi’s blood in a drastically different way from their fellows and thus pursued a social calling. This view was not altogether wrong, but the Ise Zumi saw no need to quibble with it. Those Ise Zumi who found an approach to the world that centered on the interactions of man rather than on the perfection of the body tended to embrace their own set of teachings which seemed to have naturally developed, as much an innate outgrowth of their tattoos as was the martial prowess of their kin. The rest of the family sees nothing wrong with this; after all, one man’s path cannot be everyone’s path.

The only noteworthy criticism ever made against the Heart of Togashi by other Ise Zumi is that no Tamashii have ever been found in its ranks, leading a few to suggest the path was somehow incompatible with that particular spiritual status. However, since neither Togashi himself nor his successors ever stepped in to label the Heart as ‘wayward



sons,' even the critics assumed their work must be at least partially acceptable to the Kami.

The membership in this group is low, although it appears greater because such a high proportion of them are out in the Empire at any one time. Wherever they crop up, they navigate into the world of the courts and seek to guide those around them, healing wounds of spirit, mind, and soul rather than defending people from physical danger. They are generally a bit less boisterous than their more typical kin, although the difference is small enough that most outsiders do not notice. Ultimately, given the unpredictable nature of the Ise Zumi it is almost impossible to tell whether one is dealing with a "normal" tattooed man or one of the Heart of Togashi.

THE ORDER OF EBISU

While many of the seven Great Fortunes have followings among the monks of the Order of the Ten Thousand Fortunes, one in particular has a group of specific devotees with a more pronounced political presence than most in the Brotherhood. The "Order of Ebisu" is a modest sub-group within the larger Order of Ten Thousand Fortunes, and only the most theologically savvy have ever recognized its particular differences in training and practices. To monks the Order is simply another path toward Enlightenment, no different than service in any of the other temples or sects, no more (or less) virtuous than a dedication to learning or meditation.

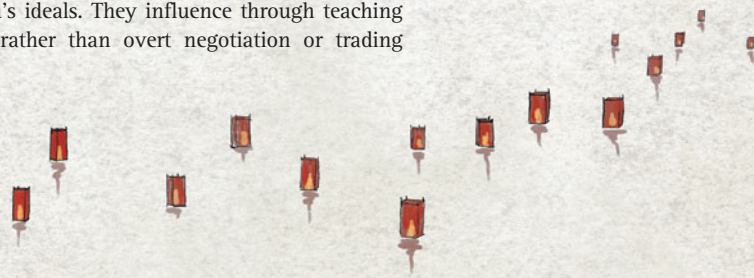
Those who follow Ebisu, however, are among the more effective monastic political presences in the Empire, though their power is not expressed in the way one would normally expect. Samurai who pay attention to the Brotherhood typically expect the monastic Orders focused upon Benten to have the most prominent place in the courts. There are certainly devotees of the Fortune of Romantic Love who display considerable skill in the courtly arts, especially among retired Crane and Scorpion samurai, but the influence of Ebisu's order is actually stronger. The reasons for this are fairly subtle and easily missed by most samurai. While Benten's blessings are a boon to anyone in the social world, her attitudes and methods are ultimately ill-suited to monks speaking for the interests of the Brotherhood in the courts. By contrast, the way of Ebisu is the way of the peasant, and since monks live among the peasants and often serve them, it is arguably the way of the monk as well.

The Order of Ebisu is not widely known, largely because most of its members spend their days working with the peasantry rather than visiting the samurai. The Order quietly expanded in the aftermath of the Great Famine, an attempt by the Brotherhood to help the beleaguered peasantry without involving itself in the sordid violence which had accompanied the peasant revolts of that time. Ebisu monks are outwardly indistinguishable from the other monks of the Thousand Fortunes order, but the observant can single them out from their dedication to the needs of the common folk, which stands above even that of other monks. They embrace Ebisu's teachings on skilled labor and

a hard day's work, along with the enjoyment (shared with his good friend Hotei) of an evening's rest when the work is done. Every member of the Order is expected each day to perform some task that is simple honest labor; while these monks do study meditation and theology, they also study the acts of farming, crafting tools, threshing rice and grain, building houses, preparing food, and all manner of other such basic trades and tasks.

When others criticize their approach, the Ebisu monks are fond of recalling that Togashi found Enlightenment from something as simple as a plum. Practice dojo, sealed chambers, and silent contemplation still have their places in the Order, but are not allowed to take over and crowd out the more basic task of Honest Labor. The Order prefers to meditate through working – a practice known as samu (see Chapter Four) and seeks to teach others through the simple example of the goodness they spread by their labors. Peasants, who are far more aware of the Order's nature than the samurai caste, cherish the times when they can work alongside these seemingly tireless monks.

On key occasions, the Order does interact with the samurai caste. They are the monks most likely to approach samurai lords and offer counsel regarding the treatment of the peasantry, and also the ones most likely to approach the Imperial authorities (particularly the Miya heralds) about serious concerns over treatment of the heimin. Despite their humble aspect the monks of Ebisu are quite firm in their convictions and will speak out readily in situations where they believe a samurai lord is ignoring the spirit of Compassion (or, conversely, truly embracing Compassion). They seek to teach the former and bolster the latter, and subtly influence courtly politics to favor their ideals. However, the members of the Order are not overtly or selfishly manipulative people; anyone showing signs of such worldly corruption is politely ejected from their ranks. The monks view conventional courtly politics as an offense to Ebisu's ideals. They influence through teaching and education rather than overt negotiation or trading



favours, acting subtly rather than actively. After all, if they behaved too overtly the samurai might become upset, leading to reprisals which would have negative effects on their charges in the peasantry. Only the most patient monks are accepted into the service of Ebisu, monks able to labor without complaint and to take their time with all things, including courtly activity. After all, if they have multiple lives to serve through the reincarnative cycle, what is the hurry? There is always work to do.

THE DISCIPLES OF THE DASHMAR

Not a school or formal body, the disciples of the Dashmar are instead a philosophical movement of the Naga people, found mainly among the Vedics. The group originated with the Vedic called the Dashmar during the Clan Wars era in the early twelfth century. They are Naga who demonstrate affection or at least respect for the cultures of non-Naga races, most notably the human society of Rokugan. The Dashmar sought to promote peace and even alliance with humans in the face of the dire circumstances that surrounded the Clan Wars, and his followers seek the same goal. Unfortunately, the disciples are a group that breeds distaste and a certain amount of suspicion among their fellow Naga.

Perhaps the most famous of the “disciples” was the Mara, the daughter of the Dashmar himself. But where the Dashmar sought to develop alliances and treaties with humans for the protection of his people in their conflict with the Foul, his daughter sought something far more personal. She took a human as her mate, siring a mixed-blood line whose descendants would rule the Mirumoto family in later generations.

Very few Naga ever followed in the footsteps of Mara, but she did typify the broader fascination that the Dashmar's disciples had with the human world. They saw in it the potential to further broaden the hive mind of the Akasha, to draw into the whole of their people developments and changes that might avoid the eternal stagnation and ultimate doom that seemed to wait in their species' future. The disciples seek out human knowledge and understanding, study their ways and teachings, and even establish true friendships with them, all to infuse new life into their own peoples' minds after they die and return to the Akasha.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the rest of the Naga have greatly questioned the disciples' motives.

The Akasha as a collective body never quite reached a consensus of opinion, and therefore the movement was permitted to continue, but those of a more traditional



mindset among the Vedics and the Naga warrior castes viewed the actions of the Mara with disdain, and even expressed hostility to the great Dashmar himself. After all, the human world was corrupt, imperfect and incomplete; adding knowledge of humanity to the Akasha could only ruin their own perfection as a people. However, these attitudes began to gradually weaken as time passed and closer connections slowly formed between human and Naga. The mysterious pseudo-Naga woman who called herself "Akasha," the rebirth of the soul of the Jerish into a human body (Hida Fubatsu), and similar events made it increasingly clear to the Naga that connections with the human world could not be denied.

Courts of the Void

There are not really any courts in the Empire which could be said to truly embody the Void, but the two which follow are about as close to such as can be found.

The High House of Light

The High House of Light is not what most would consider an appropriate location for courtly activities, but under specific and unusual circumstances it has hosted groups gathering to discuss religious and spiritual matters. Such events are understandably rare, hardly surprising given the castle's remoteness and the difficulty of reaching it. The path that leads toward the mountaintop is nearly impossible to find for those not destined to reach their goal, and the journey itself is hazardous in the strange and sometimes treacherous mountains of the Dragon lands. Few courtiers would even consider visiting the place, let alone residing there. The Imperial Winter Court of 540, held at the insistence of the deeply religious and devout Hantei XIII (and against the advice of Togashi, then in the guise of Togashi Masahito), was largely stricken from historical records due to the deaths of many guests in the mountain passes, and it is thus little surprise that the location was never used again in any subsequent Imperial Winter Court.

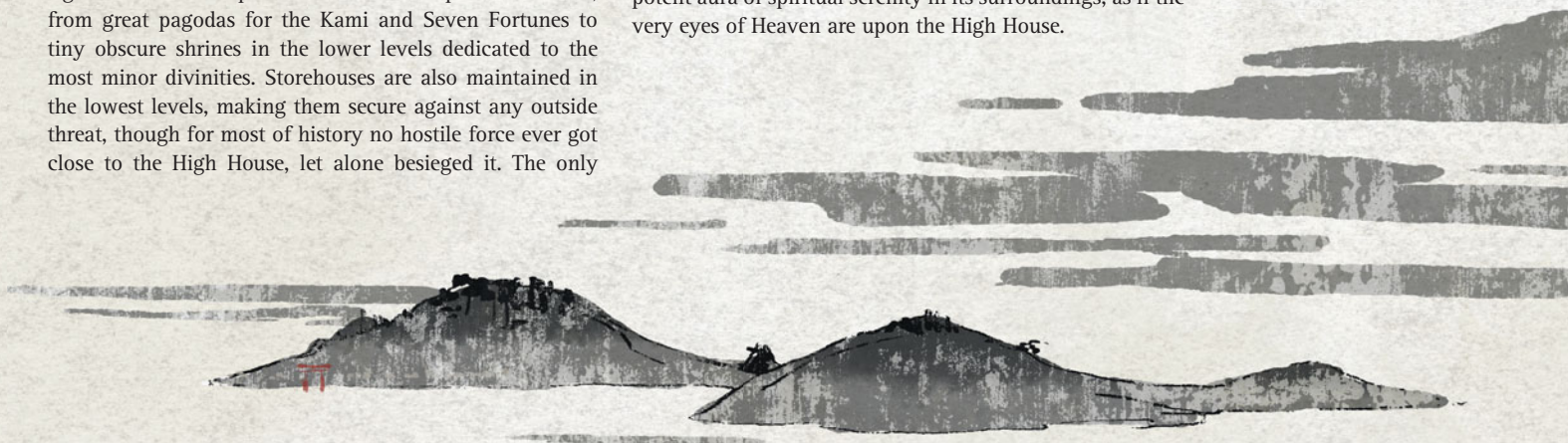
For the vast majority of the Empire's history, the High House is the home of the Kami Togashi (under various false names) and the tattooed order which takes his name. The castle fortifications are perched atop the mountain and burrow down into the peak's slopes, creating an imposing sight to visitors. The place is filled with temples and shrines, from great pagodas for the Kami and Seven Fortunes to tiny obscure shrines in the lower levels dedicated to the most minor divinities. Storehouses are also maintained in the lowest levels, making them secure against any outside threat, though for most of history no hostile force ever got close to the High House, let alone besieged it. The only

exception was the invasion of the so-called Army of Dark Fire in the year 1170, which was unable to breach the walls but still set fire to the castle, causing immense damage.

Accommodations at the High House are beyond spartan – even a Crab castle would seem comfortable by comparison. It is not a place accustomed to having guests, even infrequently. People simply do not "visit" the High House of Light – they arrive with purpose, called to the location by the inextricable weave of the Elements that surrounds it, or the enigmatic will of the Kami who dwelled in it for so long. Comfort is never a consideration in this place, but rather theological contemplation and attunement to the Elements. Guests are permitted when Togashi or the tattooed order deem it appropriate, but they are housed in simple rooms no different from those of the Ise Zumi monks. Even the Togashi daimyo himself rarely lives in any different housing than his followers.

The few official courts held here are always known for their exceptional tranquility and contemplation (aside from the often-lethal challenge of reaching the location). Guests sometimes depart claiming to have been Enlightened to some extent by their time spent in the halls and temples – while others have complained of enduring the most boring court of their lives.

This atmosphere of harmonious tranquility has a spiritual source as well as a social one. Few guests have ever entered the throne room of Togashi, which contains one of the rare connecting points between Ningen-do and the "Dragonlands," a distinct and unique portion of the Celestial Heavens where the Elemental Dragons reside. This is the only known connecting point between that region of the Celestial Realm and the mortal world, and creates a potent aura of spiritual serenity in its surroundings, as if the very eyes of Heaven are upon the High House.





THE HIGH HOUSE AND THE SPIRIT REALMS

The High House of Light is considered quite special and unique (by the very scant few scholars aware of the truth) due to its containing physical passages to both Tengoku and Yume-do. The few who studied this, almost all Dragon scholars and theologians, surmised that something about the castle caused the region to be a focal point for many of the spiritual realms, perhaps even potentially all of them. There was some truth to this line of thought, for the presence of the Kami Togashi and his design of the castle weakened the boundaries between Ningen-do and those realms which he sought to visit. This connection remained after his death and was used by both his son Hoshi and, to a lesser extent, his grandson Satsu.

After the castle was burned in the attack of the Army of Dark Fire, a few Dragon scholars surmised the location might lose its connection to the original will of Togashi, leaving the castle's ruins without significance to the Heavens. The truth of this, however, remains unknown at the end of the twelfth century. Although the castle is rebuilt, the Ise Zumi relocate their training grounds largely to the Temple of the Sun and various other minor Togashi holdings, and Togashi Satsu takes up a new role as Voice of the Emperor. This makes it unlikely that the truth will ever be discovered. Rumors abound among the common folk that the rebuilt castle is somehow haunted, and its near-empty halls have an aura of menace even to the tattooed men.



Aside from meditation, religious veneration, and observing the Ise Zumi in their eccentric training, there are few sources of entertainment in the High House of Light. It is not a playground, regardless of what fanciful and romantic notions others might occasionally write about its residents. Aside from the innumerable shrines, the castle is otherwise dominated by proving grounds and training facilities for the Ise Zumi. Those uninterested in such things must content themselves with the surreal beauty and grand vistas afforded by standing atop the highest peak in the Great Wall of the North Mountains. Guests usually try to create their own entertainment, although less honorable types of activity are universally frowned upon by the tattooed men – who seem to have a knack for always happening upon anyone trying to behave improperly within their serene halls.

THE CAVERN LIBRARY

One of the unique features of the High House of Light is a cavern frequented almost exclusively by Togashi (in his guise as successive Clan Champions). Though others are permitted to visit on exceedingly rare occasions, it is largely a private sanctum for him, used for his own personal reflections. Housed within the cavern are hundreds upon hundreds of carefully preserved scrolls, the personal chronicle of the Empire's history by Togashi himself as he observed it for over 1100 years. These meticulous journals, though skewed by his personal perspective, are a unique and irreplaceable legacy. After the burning of the citadel in 1170, their fate is a mystery.

THE SUBTERRANEAN DEPTHS

Aside from the cavern library, there are two additional unique features of the High House located deep underground, neither of which were much visited by anyone other than Togashi himself. The first of these was the crystal prison in which he kept Shosuro for over a millennium. The first Scorpion Thunder, corrupted by the Lying Darkness, was housed there until her escape during the Hidden Emperor era. Needless to say, if anyone other than Togashi ever found her, it is not recorded in history.

Not connected to that crystal prison but also deep beneath the High House of Light is another location tied to one of the spiritual realms: a quiet and stagnant subterranean lake that is connected to Yume-do, the land of dreams. It is yet another focal point for Togashi's private spiritual meditations while he dwells upon the earth, preparing for his inevitable confrontation with his brother Fu Leng.





Shinden Asahina

Shinden Asahina is not a common destination for courtly proceedings, regarded as at best a minor court by the Crane Clan. The location is nonetheless considered to be acceptable as a site for any sort of court function, and in fact is well suited for a smaller court of a rustic nature (by Crane standards). When Shinden Asahina hosts a major court, it is either during a winter season in which the weather is particularly difficult and troublesome in the northern half of the Empire, or when a court is focused more upon the Empire's religious needs.

One of the most easily identified advantages of Shinden Asahina as a court is that it is a complex of temples and shrines, a place of meditation and serenity, peaceful even by Crane standards. The tenets of Shinsei particularly associated with pacifism are inscribed on the walls of all the buildings. Despite its proximity to the frequently contested holdings of the Yasuki and the numerous wars fought over the centuries between the Crab and Crane, the region has remained largely inviolate, afflicted by force only once – when the Crab allied with the Shadowlands during the Clan Wars. Indeed, this temple complex is so sacred that the Crane normally assign no military defense to it, and it is not considered a strategic target by any other clan. Such peaceful territory is perfect for negotiations of a religious nature that are not expected to involve high levels of tension, or for those leaders who wish their guests to always recall the need for peace amid their negotiations. At least two Winter Courts of the Hantei Dynasty were held on these grounds, in each case explicitly to ensure no blood was shed during particularly tumultuous times.

The temples and buildings are beautiful even by Crane standards, and the temperatures are relatively mild even in winter. Shinden Asahina's series of quiet rooms and serene temples also include many mediation chambers,

an extensive library, and a few dojo for those gifted and so inclined. The residential areas are not so palatial as at other Crane facilities, but are generally comfortable and well maintained. While the region is not known for entertainment (and places catering to vice are notoriously difficult to find), it is rare for guests to feel they have nothing to do. The region seems to naturally pacify and revivify all who attend, granting a sense of wholeness of being and physical wellness. Most guests return to their homes refreshed from their experiences.

THE TSANGUSURI FOUNDRIES

Noteworthy among the locations within Shinden Asahina are the chambers and teaching grounds for the creation of *tsangusuri* (fetishes), items temporarily blessed with the presence of a kami to provide limited aid to their wielders. Here, both the common fetishes and far more powerful *nemuranai* are researched and developed for the use of the Crane. The so-called foundries (the name is a bit dubious given how little metal-working takes place) are off limits to most outsiders, although Imperial authorities and the rulers of the Crane Clan are permitted complete access. However, some of the outer halls are left open so guests can view those creations which are considered to be inoffensive and not risking any great secrets to show.

Guests at Shinden Asahina almost invariably make their way to these outer halls at least once, since this place is one of the most notable aspects of the whole temple complex. Such visits, however, usually leave them with a sense of dissatisfaction, since very little of the inner workings are ever shown and the limited techniques displayed to guests are already familiar to almost any *shugenja*. The outer halls feel like a show put on for the crowds, and those knowledgeable on the subject of *nemuranai* sometimes resent that they are not allowed to see more.





THE VOID WITHIN

The yojimbo did not want to remain outside the monastery's gate, but he complied with her request. Ide Hai-ying knew the monks would appreciate the consideration. They had no place for him to leave his swords, of course, and they disliked having an armed man wandering about the monastery, disrupting its atmosphere of peace.

An acolyte directed her to the rock garden. She found Shinjo Jurei there, meditating on the verandah, and knelt to wait. Eventually her commander surfaced from her trance, blinking, and spoke. "Have you been there for long?"

"I did not want to disturb you," Hai-ying said. "You seemed so peaceful."

It was a sharp contrast to a month before, when Jurei had been gritting her teeth against a scream of pain. The ride to the monastery had been brutal, but with Iuchi Nobatagi dead, the monks were Jurei's only hope of survival. They had done their work well; she seemed fully restored.

And yet . . . not entirely herself.

Jurei sighed. "I suppose you have come to summon me back to my duty."

Hai-ying bowed.

Jurei looked away. "I have been practicing meditation," she said, seemingly at random. "I never valued it before. But the abbot encouraged me; he said it would help me heal. I only join the monks when they walk in the courtyard – not in the hall. I do not understand how they

can sit for so long, contemplating nothing. Walking . . ." A smile touched her lips. "Walking around in circles, going nowhere, and yet I feel as if I am on a journey."

Silence fell. Hai-ying was reluctant to break it, fearing what her commander might say in reply.

"There is peace here," Jurei said. "Not merely a lack of war – though that is true. Peace within. My thoughts are quieter. Problems that once seemed insurmountable are now insignificant. I begin to understand, at least in a small way, what the monks mean when they speak of the transience of this world."

"Do you intend to stay here?" Hai-ying did not want to ask. But if Jurei's mind was set, delaying would change nothing.

"No." The word was quiet, but it cut the tension binding Hai-ying's muscles, leaving her limp with relief. "My duty lies outside these walls, and I will not abandon it. But I wish I could find some way to carry this peace with me, to remember it when war makes my thoughts noisy once more."

After a moment, Hai-ying said, "Nobatagi-san meditated regularly. It would honor his memory if you were to continue the practice."

Jurei nodded.

They did not speak of retirement again, not that day or any other. But they both knew where her journey would lead in the end.



Although many specific orders of the Brotherhood of Shinsei have their own Elemental affinities, Void can be considered the true Element of the Brotherhood as a whole. Arguably, only the Ishiken are more strongly attuned to its power. Early training in a monastic order strengthens a mortal's connection to the Void, and the mysterious abilities known as Kiho rely on monks' ability to channel that power, either through meditative focus or a pure exertion of intent.

A few sects, however, take this connection further. For them, Void is not just a defining principle of their identity as monks, but a core concept behind their order's philosophy.

The Order of Heroes

This sect's most obvious affinity is with the Thunder Dragon, the patron of mortal greatness. Monks of this order take that greatness as their driving purpose – not for themselves, but for those around them. Order of Heroes monks exist to find and foster heroes throughout the Empire, not to become heroes in their own right. Void is crucial to their philosophy because it is the foundation underlying every mortal's capacity for greatness. This inner strength transcends both mind and body, uniting both in harmony. Without Void, the fiercest Matsu is limited in how precisely she may strike her opponent; the most eloquent Doji courtier leaves little impression on his listeners. Without Void, the spirit is soon exhausted, leaving no capacity for transcendent achievement.

One might expect that monks of this order would seek out individuals strong in Void to foster as future heroes. This is sometimes true. Shortly after the founding of the order, one monk (whose name has not been recorded) repeatedly humiliated a young samurai-ko named Mirumoto Kirahashi. Kirahashi had a strong attunement to the Void, but her duties left her with little opportunity or inspiration to improve her kenjutsu. The monk tripped and disarmed her again and again, always dancing casually out of the path of her answering strikes. Filled with rage, she devoted herself to the art of the sword, pursuing it until at last she bested the monk. Just as she was about to cut him down, he dropped to his knees in a humble bow. "Now you are ready," he said. Kirahashi left him alive, and later went on to save the life of her lord, holding off three assassins by herself. She died of

wounds taken in that battle, but her last words were a whisper of gratitude to the monk who had inspired her.

It is just as common, however, for these monks to seek out those of great skill and Elemental power who have a poor connection to the Void. This mountain is often the harder one to climb, for while it can be easy to encourage a warrior to improve his skills or strength, samurai are not always so easily persuaded that spending hours in meditation is a good use of their time. Some will indeed undertake such a regimen – particularly those from more spiritual clans such as the Dragon or the Phoenix – but with others, more indirect methods are necessary. Monks of the order will therefore play up the "enigmatic wanderer" image of the Brotherhood, presenting obscure riddles to their targets, trying to inspire brief moments of enlightenment that will open the target's mind to greater truth.

Inspiring greatness is only one part of the process, though. The Order of Heroes seeks to bring such individuals to the place and moment where they are needed, then uses their deeds to inspire others in turn. Some members of the order have devoted themselves to the art of storytelling, visiting roadside tea-houses and other places where gossip is spread. After accepting a cup of tea from a friendly samurai, the monk will tell the tale of an elderly shugenja-ko who importuned the kami to hold back a terrible flood that would otherwise have swept away a village and all its fields. Whether he had any part in encouraging her matters little; the point is to make certain such tales of heroism are spread, so others may be motivated to follow their example.

Apart from the technique of their order, almost all monks of this sect practice the Kiho known as To the Last Breath, which allows them to restore spiritual strength to those who have reached their own limits. These two practices together epitomize the order's philosophy: facilitating the greatness of others without drawing attention to oneself.



The Order of Eternity

The Order of Eternity has its origins in the infamous Heresy of the Five Rings, although the editing of the Imperial histories means few samurai are even aware of that event. The Five Rings sect flourished and failed during the sixth century; after the Brotherhood declared it a False Path, its surviving members were given a choice between joining other orders or leaving monastic life behind entirely.

The monk Gamon was one such survivor. After the disbanding of the Five Rings sect, he joined the Order of the Nameless Gift, seeking a truth both simple and profound. He believed Gorinno, the leader of the Heresy, had failed not because his ideals were false but because he chose the wrong moment to press for their acceptance. Had he acted at the right time, the truth of his words would have been obvious to all and the so-called Heresy of the Five Rings would have led Rokugan to balance.

Gamon harbored an undying belief that one day Gorinno's philosophy would prevail, though he was careful to keep this hidden from his superiors in his new order. Instead he spoke in less direct terms, stressing the importance of recognizing the correct moment to act. So successful was he at hiding his true objective that few if any of his students ever realized what it was. By the time Gamon passed away, the Heresy of the Five Rings was all but forgotten... but his thoughts on the correct timing of actions persisted as a strain of philosophical inquiry within the Order of the Nameless Gift.

A few generations later, these ideas caught the mind of another monk in that order. Hyoushi became as obsessed as Gamon, but with a different focus: he sought to understand time itself. He spent many long hours in meditation, contemplating the nature of time; then, with the permission of his abbot, he journeyed through the Empire, studying the methods by which people paced their actions. He spoke with farmers in the fields, who looked to the natural world for signals to plant and to reap; he questioned merchants, seeking to understand how they chose which goods to offer where and at what price; he humbly petitioned courtiers to explain the ebb and flow of conversation. Above all, Hyoushi was fascinated by *iaijutsu*: the long span of time in which the two opponents faced one another in focused contemplation, then the explosion of action as they finally moved to strike. The duelist who acted too soon or too late courted defeat, and this seemed the perfect demonstration of Gamon's principle.

Hyoushi's final insight came not from current actions, but from the past. An Asako historian, discussing the wise and unwise choices made by generals in various battles, spoke often of how the same decision, made earlier or later, would have produced entirely different results. Hyoushi realized the historian could see the correct moment for action because she could see the whole span of time, rather than being caught solely in the present moment.

Time, Hyoushi declared, was an illusion. To the enlightened mind, all moments exist together: past, present, and future, with no true differentiation between

them. A mind which could transcend the illusion of time and see the whole span at once would be capable of always choosing the correct moment at which to act.

His ideas found little popularity within the Order of the Nameless Gift. The other monks considered his notions far too esoteric – possibly even insane. Hyoushi ultimately took his leave from them, seeking solitude as a hermit so he might perfect his understanding of time. He migrated westward into the lands of the Dragon Clan, where he found welcome... and there he might have been forgotten, were it not for one incident very near the end of his life.

There was a town at the base of the mountain where Hyoushi had built his hermitage, and in that town lived a young peasant woman whose life had always been unfortunate. Unloved by her parents, disregarded by her neighbors, she made her living as a common prostitute – for she was not even pretty enough to be purchased by a geisha house. At no point in her life had she felt as if anyone respected her. But one day as she was walking through town, a monk she had never met bowed to her with utmost sincerity and assisted her across a muddy patch of street.

This simple gesture changed the entire course of the young woman's life. If the Brotherhood showed her such respect, she would join them. She went to the nearest monastery, which was an outpost of the Shrine of the Seven Thunders, and declared her intent to become a monk. She was accepted, and over a year later she found in their library a scroll deposited there by Hyoushi – who was, of course, the monk who had bowed to her in the street.

Kagiri, as she now called herself, became convinced Hyoushi had achieved enlightenment. By then the old monk was dead, but she vowed to pursue and spread his studies. So the Order of Eternity was born.

Members of the Order divide their efforts between meditation and observation of action, seeking to understand the nature of time and divine the proper moment at which to act. They have a reputation for peculiar behavior, even by the standards of the Brotherhood. Their monasteries, instead of adhering to a strict schedule as most do, seem to be entirely without structure, as each monk determines for himself the correct timing of his tasks. When offered a bowl of rice, a monk of Eternity may contemplate it for an hour, allowing it to grow cold and dry, before finally lifting his chopsticks to eat. The monks' tendency to watch people at their duties often makes them unnerving to others, and in conversation they allow long moments to pass before speaking. Those unfamiliar with the order sometimes assume the monks are intellectually deficient, but nothing could be further from the truth; in fact, many of them study astrology, looking to the stars to assist them in understanding the auspices that govern right action.

Only one thing is certain: when a member of the Order of Eternity involves himself in the outside world, it is because he believes he has an important task to perform... and is looking for the correct moment at which to act.





Kiho of the Void

Void Kiho are among the strangest techniques practiced by the Brotherhood of Shinsei. These abilities can directly affect a person's spirit, for good or for ill. Unsurprisingly, the majority of Void Kiho are kharmic in nature, manipulating the connections between things and their place in the tapestry of fate.

Monks seeking to master Void Kiho face a peculiar challenge: there is no way to "practice" them. A student of Water may flounder in a lake for months; a student of Earth might ask others to strike him until he learns to harden his body; a student of Air can stand in a windy place and rehearse different ways of moving. But a student of the Void can only meditate, spending his hours in contemplation of being and nonbeing. Mastery will come... or it will not.

Some Brotherhood orders claim Void Kiho cannot be taught at all; they can only be understood. The process of learning them is one of enlightenment, and each seeker must find his own path to that destination. Other sects laugh at this notion and say this philosophy is nothing more than an admission of incapability by the teachers. All Kiho ultimately depend on the student's understanding, of course, but instruction can prepare the way, for Void as for any other Element.

The truth may lie somewhere in between, for there are certainly at least a few reasons to believe innate capacity plays a role in the mastery of Void Kiho. Monks have been known to execute Kiho they have never been taught. This happens particularly with the dim mak or death touch: no orthodox sect within the Brotherhood teaches it, but

the knowledge has appeared again and again among their ranks, usually when a monk is pressed to the brink by necessity or rage. Another suggestive fact is that some students seem completely incapable of mastering Void Kiho of any kind, despite the best instruction. Their inability is intriguing to Rokugan's more esoteric scholars, who speculate on the relationship between their lack and the terrible affliction known as momoku – or, on the opposite end of the spectrum, the powerful connection to the Void that makes some shugenja into Ishiken.

The Brotherhood's own scholars have devoted much time to contemplating the nature and proper use of Void Kiho. The potential for unethical abuse is high, and many feel that inexperienced students should not be permitted to study them at all. The tendency for some monks to manifest these abilities without instruction, however, means true control is fundamentally impossible.

Internal Void Kiho

Even the most enlightened monks have difficulty achieving sufficient understanding to control the Void within themselves, so internal Void Kiho are rare even compared to other Void Kiho.

TOUCH THE VOID DRAGON

*"I am everything, I am nothing. I am watching you."
– The Dragon of Void*

This Kiho is an oddity even among its kind, as it uses the monk's understanding of the Void to forge a stronger connection to the other four Elements. Only by comprehending the contradictory nature of the Void – that it is everything and nothing, presence and absence – can this Kiho be mastered.

Beginners are only able to perceive and draw on the most obvious resonance in the world around them, such that they cannot attune themselves to Water except when near the ocean, or to Air except when amid the plains. Those with greater comprehension can sometimes refine this understanding, allowing them to call upon Water near rivers or lakes, or Air when on a windy mountaintop.

Kharmic Void Kiho

It is no surprise that kharmic Kiho are the most common type. After all, karma itself is a concept intimately linked with the Void.

BANISH ALL SHADOWS

"Conquer the weakness within, and know true strength." – Togashi Mitsu

The effect of this Kiho may be subtle but it can also be shockingly dramatic. By striking the correct meridians in someone's body, the monk can balance their chi, removing weakness and restoring lost strength. This may be something as mundane as a bushi



whose thoughts are consumed by love being able to focus on his duty – or it may be something as dramatic as a blind woman who can see again.

Scholars who have written about this Kiho claim it functions by forging a connection between the target and his eternal true self: the spirit which has lived through countless lifetimes, many of which were free of that flaw. The Kiho does not affect the body or mind; it only facilitates the temporary enlightenment of the target, who realizes his frailties are ephemeral things. (Unfortunately, this understanding is likewise ephemeral.)

SILENT SOLACE

“In the strangest places, seek yourself.”
– *The Tao*

Like certain other Void Kiho, this one affects the relationship between the target and the other four Elements – in this case, weakening a shugenja’s connection to the kami. Whereas the Air Kiho known as The Great Silence targets the external voice, making it impossible for a shugenja to utter his prayers, Silent Solace quiets the internal voice, so the shugenja must plead much more fervently with the kami before they will respond.

Most monks feel this Kiho should only be used defensively, against shugenja who are threatening harm to others. Some, however, have been known to also employ it against shugenja whose spiritual talents have made them arrogant. The ability to speak with the kami, like all other gifts from the Celestial Heavens, should not be abused.

SONG OF THE WORLD

“Seek the proper resonance with the Elements, and the world will reveal itself to you in full.”
– *Asahina Beniha, family daimyo*

In some ways a direct echo of the philosophy pursued by the Order of Eternity, the Kiho called Song of the World affects the practitioner’s perception of time. This effect allows him to anticipate the decisions of another, moving more rapidly and delaying his foe’s own action.

This Kiho is partially responsible for the stereotype of the monk teaching the arrogant samurai a lesson. Although it cannot overcome great differences in speed, it can sometimes allow a monk to disarm a bushi before he has even fully drawn his sword.

SPIN THE KHARMIC WHEEL

Even among the monks of the Brotherhood, who cultivate the strength of Void within themselves and dedicate a lifetime to the development of their spiritual capabilities, this Kiho is not easily mastered. Which is for the best: to use it carelessly would be a terrible blasphemy.

With a single strike (and a great expenditure of will), a master of this Kiho can fundamentally rewrite another person’s karma. The shugenja-ko who has struggled against a karmic nemesis through multiple lifetimes may find herself free of that struggle... but haunted by the hungry dead. The argumentative courtier may begin to believe everything he hears. The lecherous bushi may



rededicate himself to Bushido, measuring himself against an ideal he can never truly achieve.

The monk who triggers this change has no control over what may result. All he can do is roll the dice of fate. Because of this, many elders in the Brotherhood believe this Kiho should only be used as a last resort, to give a second chance to those trapped by their own karma. A monk who employs this Kiho will often be closely questioned by his abbot afterward to determine if it was truly justified.

TO THE LAST BREATH

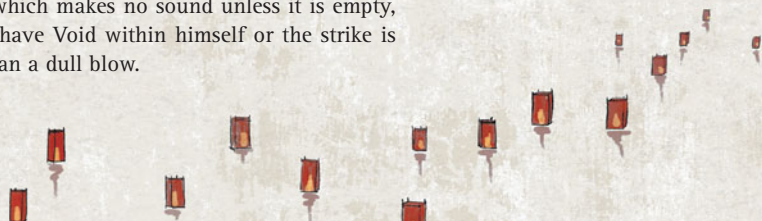
This Kiho is among the easiest for monks to master because it is merely an extension of their own meditative training. Consequently, it sees frequent use among the more lenient teachers of meditation. While their stricter counterparts argue such assistance cheapens the students’ learning and undermines their future strength, the more generous say by sharing the experience and benefit of serenity with a novice, they reveal the path more clearly – as a teacher should.

Martial Void Kiho

The Void is ill-suited to any blatantly violent application. The strength of Water, the resilience of Earth, the restlessness of Air, and the sheer damaging power of Fire all have clear relevance in combat, but the enigmatic nature of Void – knowing and not-knowing, all-encompassing and yet absent – means it rarely manifests its power in this fashion.

VOID FIST

The Void Fist, while the most obviously martial use of Void, is a far cry from its Elemental counterparts. It is a form of meditation, refreshing the spirit of the monk who practices it; those who teach Void Kiho liken this atemi strike to the hammer that strikes a bell. The resonance of its impact clears the mind and strengthens the soul. But like a bell, which makes no sound unless it is empty, the target must have Void within himself or the strike is nothing more than a dull blow.





Mystical Kiho

Even those who practice mystical Kiho for the other Elements often cannot explain their effects. Mastery of mystical Void Kiho requires the monk to attune his spirit to something beyond himself; what results is not always beneficial.

DEATH TOUCH

"A curse on you. A curse of death..."

No Kiho is more despised and heretical than the dim mak, which drains the body, mind, and spirit over the course of hours, with excruciating pain and weakness, until the victim finally dies. Most monks caught using it are immediately excommunicated from their order, regardless of affiliation. No sect within the Brotherhood is permitted to teach it; anyone who does so will certainly be excommunicated, along with any acolytes. Knowledge of this Kiho persists because it is practiced within certain heretical sects outside the Brotherhood (such as the Order of Venom)... and because some monks discover it spontaneously, finding themselves striking their foes with sudden lethal power.

The Death Touch operates by crippling the target's connection to the Void and through it his connection to all the other Elements. The bravest samurai will weep in agony as his will fades away; the greatest scholar will lose the ability to think. No healer can halt this damage once it has begun. Only a strong connection to the Void can save those who have been struck with the dim mak, and even then, their recovery will be slow and arduous.

EIGHT DIRECTIONS AWARENESS

Compared with the dim mak, Eight Directions Awareness seems harmless. Brotherhood teachings, however, warn against the hidden perils of this Kiho. The name of its cousin among shugenja spells, By the Light of the Moon, acknowledges a connection to the Celestial being associated with madness – originally Onnotangu, later Hitomi and then the Obsidian Dragon, but all embodying the risk of insanity.

Eight Directions Awareness does not merely bestow a single glimpse of the world around the practitioner. Its revelation is constant, and not all monks have the strength of mind to handle the flood of information. Even those who are not overwhelmed by the continuing awareness of ants, beetles, flies, mice, and other tiny forms of life may find themselves accidental witness to the shame of others, as the Kiho reveals everything they wish to keep hidden. Many monks therefore caution against the casual or frequent use of this Kiho.

Mysteries of the Brotherhood: Meditation

No single activity is more associated with the Brotherhood of Shinsei than meditation. It is a practice they share with many others in Rokugan, but no other group places meditation at the core of its teachings, the foundation upon which all other gifts are built. So great is the Brotherhood's skill in meditation that many samurai study it with monastic teachers, placing themselves humbly at the feet of men and women they utterly outrank.

The Purpose of Meditation

"There is no space for regret in the pure center of the self." – Asako Ayako

The basic reason so many Rokugani engage in meditation is to foster inner strength (represented mechanically by the Void Ring). Brief periods of meditation can restore such strength after it has been exhausted (by spending Void Points); habitual practice can increase the Void Ring itself, deepening the individual's connection to that most enigmatic of Elements.

To speak of meditation only in those terms, however, is akin to speaking of food only as fuel for the body, with no regard for its aesthetic qualities, social function, or ideological significance. There are many other benefits to meditation, and the Brotherhood of Shinsei has spent a thousand years exploring them to their fullest.

Because most meditative practice involves clearing the mind or focusing it intensely on a specific target, it is an ideal tool for developing self-control in a variety of forms. This is broadly referred to as "serenity," and it is one of the two major goals of meditation. Monks learn to maintain their focus in the face of any distraction. They also learn to control their emotions, holding onto composure when others would give in to anger, fear, desire, or hatred. (GMs who wish to represent this mechanically can allow characters to substitute their Meditation skill for Etiquette when rolling to maintain their composure or resist the manipulation of others.)

The practitioner can also achieve greater "insight," the second major goal of meditation. Through hours of focused reflection, a monk or a dedicated samurai can come to terms with his own frailties and even overcome them, developing new strength within himself. In game terms, conscientious use of the Meditation skill can provide in-game justification for removing some kinds of Mental Disadvantages or purchasing certain Mental Advantages.

The insight achieved from meditation is not limited to the practitioner's own internal spirit. Many Brotherhood orders, especially those with a strong affinity to a particular Element, undertake specific meditative practices to increase their understanding of that Element. Any true advancement in that regard, though, cannot be separated from physical effort; contemplating Earth may enlighten



one as to its nature, but actual strength in Earth requires both understanding and application. Only the Void can be known through contemplation alone.

These benefits are available to anyone – monk, samurai, or even peasant – who devotes themselves to meditation. Monks, however, are trained to take this practice further, into realms beyond ordinary mortal existence. It is through meditation that they unlock the spiritual abilities of their orders. This training first gives monks a stronger connection to the Void and grants them the capacity to execute Kiho – either through the straightforward exertion of will, or through brief intense bouts of meditative focus. Without strength in Void and skill in meditation, a monk may well find his chi cannot answer his call.

Finally, the greatest masters can attain something like a connection to the Spirit Realms. Although monks do not speak with the kami as shugenja do, they too have responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the Empire, particularly its heimin inhabitants. Meditation can allow a monk to gain insight into someone's spiritual blessings or afflictions, paving the way for the latter to be rectified. The Earth Kiho known as Harmony in Earth even grants a monk the ability to sense the presence of spirits and other entities that might disrupt the peace of Ningen-do.

There are rumors that sustained meditation can even bestow increased longevity upon the practitioner. Certainly a great many monks live to advanced age, though this is more likely due to their peaceful lives and healthy lifestyles. Legends of monks living to be hundreds of years old through their spiritual power are simply that: legends.

Methods of Meditation

There are almost as many meditation techniques in the Brotherhood as there are sects. The differences between them may be profound, but just as often they are subtle, the result of individual teachers refining what they have learned and creating variant approaches. Although the Brotherhood agrees there are many paths to Enlightenment, monks are as prone as any human to believing their path is superior. Bitter feuds have broken out over matters as small as which hand should be placed on top of the other when meditating. (One of the ways Shinsei may be recognized in a painting or a sculpture is that his left hand is always atop his right. The disagreement is whether this is therefore the superior arrangement or is instead a sign that he already achieved Enlightenment. If it is superior, aspirants should likewise place their left hand atop the right, but if it is proof of his Enlightenment, they should not presume the same and instead should place their right hands atop the left.)

The most common form of meditation, promoted by the Four Temples and therefore very widespread throughout Rokugan, is *zazen* (seated meditation). At a monastery, this is often done in a dedicated hall called a *zendo*. Seated meditation may be practiced in a variety of postures and arrangements: different traditions recommend the half-lotus or full-lotus positions or kneeling in *seiza*, and some place the monks facing one another while others arrange them to face the wall. Before and after meditating, the practitioner bows to his seat and then to his fellows. A bell signals the beginning and end of the meditation period; this customarily rings three times to start and one time to end.

A second related type of meditation is rarely found among samurai, but is common in monasteries. This is *kinhin* (walking meditation), which punctuates the long periods of *zazen*. During *kinhin*, the monks walk a circular route in a room or a courtyard, sometimes with a percussion instrument called a “wooden fish” marking the beat of their steps. Here as well as in *zazen*, a bell signals the beginning and end of the period.

The third major type is one which many Rokugani would not even recognize as meditation: *samu*, which might be translated as “chores.” Monasteries seldom keep servants, and so most of the work must be performed by the monks themselves. They are encouraged to find serenity in their chores, so that simple tasks such as cooking supper, raking gravel paths, or sweeping floors become their own form of meditation. The point is not merely to do the work, but to do so mindfully, focusing all one's attention on the task and experiencing it completely.

Finally, most Brotherhood sects train their initiates in the basics of jiu-jitsu. However, in non-sohei orders this is done for a meditative rather than a martial purpose. The practice of martial arts is sometimes considered a form of





samu, but regardless of classification, the attention to and mastery of the body can bring both serenity and insight.

Proper arrangement of the body is considered very important in all types of meditation, though in samu it is governed more by the shape of the task than by any esoteric philosophy. The spine should be effortlessly straight, not stiff or hunched. The hands may be in a number of different arrangements, called *inzou* or *mudra*. The most common in *zazen*, as mentioned above, places either the right or the left hand atop the other, palms up and thumbs touching. During *kinhin* one hand is usually in a fist, with the other covering it. Some orders, however, believe one can foster different spiritual effects with different *mudra*, based on the flow of *chi* through the hands. Many of these *mudra* are closely guarded secrets within their sects, never shared with outsiders.

The importance of posture even extends to the eyes, and here again different practices prevail. The Four Temples promote a posture where the eyes are half open, signaling neither engagement with the world nor complete avoidance of it. Other traditions recommend keeping the eyes fully open, fully closed, or at various points in between. Some meditative practices include an object for the gaze to rest upon; this may be a burning candle, a statue of a Fortune, a mandala, or anything else that might foster insight.

Most basic forms of meditation encourage the practitioner to focus on his breath as a method of disciplining his mind. During *zazen*, a monk may count his breaths to keep his thoughts from straying; during *kinhin* he may time his breaths to the pace of his steps. Proper breathing starts in the belly rather than in the chest. Advanced practitioners in esoteric sects commonly reflect on koans or recite mantras silently or out loud; these may be prayers, sutras, or syllables with no meaning beyond their spiritual power. Some Shinseist monks focus on the name of Shinsei himself. The Pure Song Shrine pioneered the use of singing bowls, large versions of which are found in many temples and shrines. In meditative practice, the bowl is held in the hand and a wooden mallet drawn around its rim to produce the vibration, which then becomes a focus for the practitioner's mind.

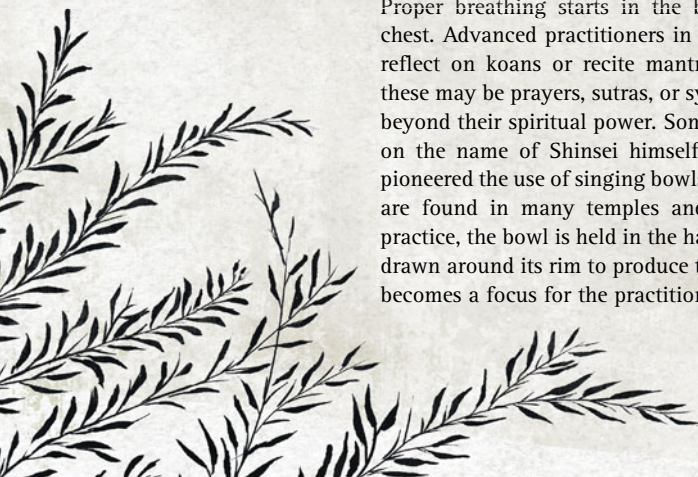
In certain corners of the Brotherhood, meditative practices are more extreme. Orders which promote endurance, such as the Temple of Persistence or Tengoku's Fist, commonly require their initiates to meditate in physically taxing postures or punishing environments. While a monk from the Shrine of the Seven Thunders may meditate atop or alongside a waterfall, drawing serenity from the constant rush of sound, one from the Temple of Osano-Wo is more likely to be under the waterfall, allowing it to beat ceaselessly upon his head. Adherents of this approach say it is no different from lifting heavy burdens to strengthen the body: anyone can concentrate in a silent room, but only by challenging their ability to maintain focus can they truly learn to ignore distraction.

Not all types of meditation require the practitioner to empty his mind. Throughout the centuries, various teachers have taught their students to contemplate particular subjects as a means of attaining insight. One common topic is called "Fortune-in-body," where the monk seeks the understanding that the power of the Fortunes dwells within his flesh (sometimes visualizing this within particular limbs or organs). Conversely, ascetic sects often encourage their members to contemplate the foulness of their own bodies, recognizing the impurity of eating, defecation, disease, rot, and so forth, thereby freeing oneself from attachment to physical existence. This may be the origin of a controversial practice attributed to the Shinmaki Order, whose followers are said to meditate in the presence of corpses. Whether the practice is real or merely metaphorical, it would fit within the tradition of foulness meditation.

Mysteries of the Brotherhood: Sacred Architecture

The construction of temples, shrines, and monasteries in Rokugan is not merely a matter of practical need or even aesthetics. The home of a religious order is designed to contribute to the spiritual power of the site and the enlightenment of its inhabitants. Many an abbot will claim that malignant spirits cannot cross the boundaries of his temple, and although it is certainly not impossible to act violently on sacred ground – plenty of wars through Rokugan's history have proved that – such places do tend to have an atmosphere of serene contemplation which many samurai are reluctant to break.

The actual design of a religious building is often not much different from residential architecture. The materials are the same – wood, paper, and straw, with a stone foundation and ceramic tiles for the roof – and some religious structures actually begin as normal residences before a pious samurai bequeaths them to a favored order. The details of sacred architecture vary across the Empire, according to both sect and local tradition, but there are a number of commonalities.



The ideal arrangement of any major sacred site will be a complex of seven buildings – though the choice of which buildings to include is not always the same. The number, of course, has significance in many facets of Rokugani life, from the original seven Great Clans to the seven virtues of Bushido to the Seven Great Fortunes. This last is the most likely origin for the practice, as groups of seven buildings were common in early Rokugan before the Kami left their stamp upon the nascent Empire.

This number does not mean there are always seven buildings in a religious structure, of course. Small locations will have fewer, while in the largest sites there may be quite a few more. The precise nature and arrangement of these seven structures varies from sect to sect; theological scholars can often trace the history of the Brotherhood simply through the resemblances and differences of various monastic sites. Three kinds of building, however, are liable to be found at any religious site:

Torii Arches: Almost every holy site has one or more torii arches through which visitors are expected to pass when they enter the place. Some orders may have as many as seven arches, while smaller or more ascetic groups may have only one or two. Passing beneath these arches is supposed to symbolize departure from the material world and purification from the Three Sins that hinder the soul on the quest for Enlightenment.

Portico: This roofed gallery marks the boundary between the sacred precinct and the world outside. One side is closed with a wall; the other is open to the interior courtyard, and gives sheltered access to all parts of the compound. In northern Rokugan the portico may be closed off with shutters in the winter, to prevent it from becoming choked with snow.

Main hall: At a minor religious site, this may be the only structure present; without it, there essentially is no site. It is often the largest structure in the group, though in some Shinseist temples and monasteries it is surpassed by the Hall of the Tao. The main hall is the primary locus of worship, the place where visitors come to pray and make their offerings. It usually houses at least one statue, which may depict Shinsei, the sect's patron Fortune, the sect's founder, or some other suitable figure. The main hall can be divided through the placement of shoji, allowing a variety of activities to be carried out within its walls.

Every religious site also includes at least one *temizuya*, a roofed fountain where monks and visitors can ritually purify themselves by pouring a dipper of water over their hands and their heads. Other buildings which may be found at the larger sites include:

Hall of the Tao: Shinseist orders almost always have a "lecture hall" where the monks sit to receive instruction from their abbot. The nature

of this instruction depends on the sect in question, but usually begins with a quotation from the Tao of Shinsei followed by the reading of one or more commentaries upon that quotation. Some orders include the abbot's own interpretation at the end, or even a question-and-answer period wherein the monks can respond.

Meditation hall: Not all sects maintain a separate building for meditation, preferring to conduct such activities within a segregated portion of the main hall or in the Hall of the Tao. When this building is present, it is usually quite plain, decorated only with an object or image designed to serve as a meditative focus for the monks.

Pagoda: Some main halls are constructed as pagodas, but more often this is a separate free-standing structure, a multi-story tower whose appearance is very distinctive to religious sites. Pagodas always have an odd number of levels: three, five, seven, nine, or even thirteen (though seven is by far the most common). They are used as reliquaries, housing both nemuranai and mundane objects of great spiritual significance, such as priceless scrolls or the ashes of a revered abbot. Access to the inside of a pagoda is usually restricted to senior members of the order.

Library: At a minimum the library contains multiple copies of the Tao; it also collects sutras, theological treatises, the history of the site and the order that administers it, and sometimes much more. Because monasteries are rarely sacked in war, many samurai officials send copies of important texts to the nearest temple or shrine for safekeeping.

Belfry: The daily life of a monk is regulated from waking until sleeping. The site's bell marks the division of his time, signaling when he should move from one task to the next. These bells are often huge and are usually housed in their own structures. However, smaller sites often place the bell somewhere in the main hall instead.





GM's Aid:

MECHANICS FOR SACRED SPACES

The default assumption of L5R is that no place in Rokugan is metaphysically superior unless a shugenja has blessed it in some way. Campaigns which focus on the spiritual aspects of Rokugani life, however, may wish to grant significance to religious sites based on their construction or the pious activities of their residents. This could manifest in a variety of ways.

SPIRITUAL DEFENSES. Holy sites may be inimical to the presence of hostile spirits, including ghosts, supernatural creatures of Ningen-do, and denizens of the Spirit Realms. This could be applied as a dice penalty in a manner similar to the Kiho called Rebuke of the Heavens. The exact strength of the dice penalty (number of dice, kept or unkept) could be stronger at major sites, or increase in strength as one passes through the torii arches or enters the main hall or the pagoda.

INNER PEACE. A brief visitor is unlikely to feel any difference while at a monastery, temple, or shrine, but anyone who stays for an extended period may find his spiritual and mental afflictions slowly drifting away... so long as he respects and participates in the holy atmosphere. The GM may opt to have Mental Disadvantages be weakened or suspended while in a sacred precinct; the same may be true of some Spiritual Disadvantages. A truly powerful option would be to grant a benefit in resisting the growth of the Shadowlands Taint, either by slowing the speed of its increase or simply bestowing a die-bonus to the Earth Roll. However, a benefit of this magnitude should require lengthy residence at a minimum, possibly even the taking of holy orders.

SUPERNATURAL ATTUNEMENT. Shugenja may find the kami easier to interact with on sacred ground. This is unlikely to apply across the board to all spells; rather, a particular Element or spell keyword will be favored, depending on the nature of the sect that maintains the temple. In mechanical terms, this could grant bonus dice to the Spellcasting roll, lower the Spellcasting TN, or even grant a Free Raise on a spell which is uniquely attuned to the site. (An example of the latter would be the spell *Fury of Osano-Wo* in a site dedicated to the Temple of Osano-Wo.)



Refectory: Placing the kitchen and dining area in a separate building is necessary to maintain the spiritual purity of other structures; it is also a matter of great practicality. Both the smells of cooking and the fire hazard it creates are best kept away from the rest of the compound.

Bathhouse: Monks place a great deal of importance on cleanliness, both spiritual and physical. Few orders allow the sensuous luxury of soaking in hot water, but all of them designate some kind of space for washing, whether it is combined with the refectory or separate.

Living quarters: In most sects, only the abbot receives separate living quarters (which are sometimes set apart in their own building). The rest of the monks make do with simple futons, laid out in a communal room or in a series of small interchangeable cell-like chambers. These quarters may be in one of the main buildings of the compound, in a separate building not counted as part of the compound, or even a simple open space in a building that serves another purpose during the day.

Offices: Major sects conduct a great deal of business with the outside world. The structure in which this is performed, however, is rarely counted as one of the seven buildings of the compound; it ranks even below the refectory and bathhouse.

GEOMANCY

Holy sites which did not begin as ordinary residences are usually placed in specific locations of spiritual power, and their structures are always arranged to harmonize with that power. For example, temples and monasteries are often situated to the northeast of cities so as to defend the cities against evil spirits; some even have a "demon gate" in the northeast of the portico through which such things can be banished.

Many complexes place key buildings in a strict north-south line, with the main gate to the south. Others incorporate Elemental symbolism, associating the north with Water, the west with Air, the south with Fire, the east with Earth, and the center with Void – the center, of course, being where the main hall is always placed. These associations are marked with appropriate colors and decorations, and sometimes play a role in the activities of the monks; for example, an acolyte looking to improve his understanding of Earth may carry out his meditation in the eastern part of the monastery.

Geomancy may also play a role on a finer scale, with individual objects being arranged to foster a good flow of spiritual energy. This is especially true in gardens, and many monasteries are famed for the delicate harmony and spiritual peace of their gardens. The placement of trees, flowers, stones, and watercourses can symbolize the Celestial Heavens or the path to Enlightenment, and contemplating their beauty opens the mind and restores the spirit. Over time these principles have spread to the Phoenix, the Dragon, and many of the Empire's shugenja families.



Mysteries of the Brotherhood: Enlightenment

What is Enlightenment?

A monk and his student were returning to the monastery after a short trip. The monk carried a heavy stone for the temple gardens; it was so massive that he had to move slowly, muscles aching with every step.

The student asked: "Master, what is enlightenment like?"

The monk immediately halted, dropping the rock.

The student nodded. "I see. But then, what is life like after enlightenment?"

The monk picked up the rock and continued walking.

When the first war against Jigoku engulfed the fledgling Empire, none of the Kami knew how to stop it. The waves of oni and bakemono were relentless. Akodo's armies could not hold them back, Shiba's intelligence could not defeat them, and Doji's words had no effect. All seemed hopeless; Hantei's nascent Empire would be destroyed mere years after its founding.

Then the Little Teacher appeared, and the Empire's fate was changed forever.

Shinsei was not an immortal Kami. He was merely human... yet his wisdom saved the Empire. His teachings influenced Rokugani religion, philosophy, and society in ways not even the Kami could equal. He lived a simple and spiritual lifestyle that would be emulated by countless others; indeed, some Rokugani historians refer to him as "the first monk." Stories of his feats and wisdom are told every day.

Most important of all, it is said that Shinsei was the first person to become Enlightened.

Before Shinsei, supreme enlightenment was believed to be solely the domain of gods. While Shinsei himself never claimed to be Enlightened, he did say Enlightenment could indeed be attained by mere mortals. Many doubted Shinsei's claims... until they met him. Even Hantei himself had doubts, but after their famous night-long conversation he became convinced. Shinsei knew of the Celestial Heavens, could sense the dance of the kami, and felt compassion even for Fu Leng's misguided followers. And he knew how to defeat Jigoku.

At the time, the secrets of the Elements were not truly comprehended by shugenja, even those of Isawa's tribe. The concept of Void was unheard of; at the time, even Isawa did not understand it. Void, as it is known in the modern Empire, was introduced by Shinsei, and many believe it was this comprehension of the Void that led Shinsei to enlightenment. This is why the Brotherhood emphasizes Void in its teachings. Distinctions between the other Elemental Rings are simply an illusion. Earth is associated with the hard and unyielding, and Water with the pure and flowing... yet under the right circumstances, Earth can be pure and fluid, while Water can be hard and unyielding. Shinsei's insight was that everything else is merely a representation of the Void; the forms of this world are transitory illusions. The world is empty, but that emptiness is full. The thunderclap does not die; it merely echoes.

As Shinsei played the shakuhachi flute, Shinjo remarked, "You said you were happy, and yet your song is sad."

"I am happy," Shinsei replied. "The sadness you hear is within you."

The concept of Enlightenment is a tricky one, and few agree on what it even means. Even scholars of the Tao cannot agree. Enlightenment defies description, a higher state of consciousness that can only be understood by those who attain it. According to the general canonical understanding of Shinsei's teachings, simply attempting to explain Enlightenment results in the listener forming preconceived notions about the concept... thereby sabotaging any future attempts to achieve it! This is why, when asked about Enlightenment, most monks reply very cryptically. They will often answer with a koan, a story-riddle with no objective answer.

Yet there is rarely any question if someone has achieved Enlightenment. Enlightenment is something no one agrees on, but almost everyone recognizes. Enlightened individuals are clearly and recognizably serene, humble, and compassionate, yet possess an inner strength and stoicism that seems impossible by human standards. An Enlightened soul is wise and insightful, never seems angry or hateful, does not desire anything or cling to anything in the mortal world. Yet Enlightened individuals do not lose their personalities, nor do they "assimilate" into some singular worldview. Some believe Enlightenment grants one insight into past lives, or wins the favor of the Elemental kami, or even grants mastery over the karmic cycle.

It is also known that anyone can become Enlightened. Lineage, status, and station are unnecessary. It may not even be required for one to follow Shinsei's teachings – Shinsei himself did not have the benefit of his own teachings, after all! However, finding one's way in the dark is made easier by the beacons of those who went first.

The specific nature of Enlightenment is a point of contention. It has nothing to do with knowledge or intellect, nor is it a "spiritual" awakening or a realization of supernatural perceptions. Put simply, Enlightenment





WHAT IN JIGOKU'S NAME ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT!?

*"Sometimes I think Shinsei was confused."
- Hiruma Aki*

The language of Enlightenment is poetry. That is to say, poetry is something that cannot be grasped or appreciated rationally. Likewise, according to Shinsei, the logical mind is actually an obstacle to attaining an Enlightened state. This can seem paradoxical; the Enlightened mind is perfectly capable of being empirical and analytical. But then, that is sort of the point.

Rational language communicates things literally. It is concerned with the physical and material. It is "scientific" by its very nature, describing things in encapsulated terms, concrete ideas, and concepts that communicate specific meanings. The purpose of rational language is to communicate as objectively as possible: This is true, that is false. This happened, that didn't.

Poetic language does not work this way. Poetry communicates by evoking images, emotions, feelings. One cannot digest a poem literally and still receive its full meaning... meaning that is subjective to begin with. One must not approach poetic language "rationally" but instead must experience it. One must feel it. One must let go.

So it is with Enlightenment. The purpose of the Tao's cryptic language, the purpose of seemingly unresolvable koans, is not literal meaning. It is the evocation of feelings within the reader. To gain the insight, one must turn off the mind and embrace the experience conjured by the passage. A question like "before birth, what was your original face?" is not intended to receive a literal answer. The purpose is to experience what the question summoned within you. It is to say what cannot be rationally expressed.

The color of wind.

Five moons reflected in one pool.



means seeing and comprehending universal truth. Life is filled with distractions from truth, endless cycles of seeking, clinging, avoiding, and ignoring. To be Enlightened, these cycles must be broken. Those who have awakened have purified themselves of all earthly desires, banished all delusions, and thereby shattered the cycle of reincarnation and worldly suffering.

How Enlightenment manifests depends on the person. It can simply be realizing one's true self, but it can also be the abandonment of self. It can be true unity with the Void, or being able to see through illusions to comprehend the true nature of things. It could be liberation from the karmic wheel. Or it could be none of these things, for perhaps there is nothing to realize.

The Path to Enlightenment

Many sects claim the true path to Enlightenment, yet they often disagree with each other. (For more discussion about different paths to Enlightenment, consult Chapter 4 of the L5R 4th Edition Supplement *Secrets of the Empire*.) Generally speaking, Rokugani fall into one of two viewpoints regarding attaining Enlightenment: it is either something that is obtained by turning *inward*, disengaging from the outside world, or it is attained by turning *outward*, diving head-first into worldly experience. Typically, those who ascribe to the first theory believe Enlightenment is attained suddenly and all at once, while those ascribing to the latter view feel Enlightenment is achieved in stages on a gradual path to a full awakening.

Shinsei taught that the greatest obstacle to man's comprehension of the universe's true nature was his "attachments." Man clings, man suffers, man rejects, man ignores. He embraces illusion, makes blind judgments, and casts aside uncomfortable truths. Impermanence always reminds us that the world is ever-changing; nothing material can last. Even death is not final, for the karmic wheel is ever-spinning.

Only by overcoming these perceptions and putting an end to attachments can a man see past the world of impermanent forms and comprehend the truth. When one stops craving and quiets the Self, one can hear the truth. When one ceases to fix the mind on the material and the physical, one can accept the truth. Only by letting go can one end suffering.

The first stage of gradual Enlightenment is known as *kenshō*. This is the initial insight of one who is starting along the path. This epiphany can take many forms, and the experience will vary from person to person. The insight itself also varies, but usually pertains to realizing the inherent emptiness of all things, the falseness of the Self, or some other (often paradoxical) essential aspect of the natural world.

It is important to remember that this is merely the first glimpse of Enlightenment. The experience is sometimes likened to seeing the walls of a cave illuminated by a flash of lightning; for that fragment of an instant, the cave is clear, but in the following moment it is gone again. There is danger in believing this glimpse is the end of the path. Many have claimed to achieve Enlightenment when in truth their journey was only beginning. In the middle of the twelfth century the man called Rosoku, the last descendant of Shinsei, sparked an Empire-wide interest in Enlightenment, and in the year 1167 many samurai throughout the Empire were said to suddenly achieve it. However, it is most likely that Rosoku's teachings merely caused these individuals to attain the initial insight of *kenshō* rather than complete "true" Enlightenment. Their subsequent actions would seem to justify this interpretation, although even their initial insights were enough to deeply affect and change their understanding of the world around them.

After this first epiphany, one is said to progress to *satori*, or the "opening of one's own nature." If *kenshō* is the lightning flash that briefly illuminates the cave, *satori* is the carrying of a torch lit by the lightning's flame. One who follows *satori* is not satisfied with the initial insight,

but goes on to seek a better understanding. By adhering to this path, one may eventually be fortunate enough to achieve *daigo*: final, absolute Enlightenment. Those who are approaching this state are said to exhibit great spiritual and physical gifts, with some tales even claiming that their feet no longer walk upon the ground.

FALSE PATHS

There are many dangers on the road to Enlightenment, the most significant of which are known as False Paths. Many supposed “enlightened souls” offer alternate paths to Enlightenment, shortcuts to universal truth, or other such seductive promises. Yet ultimately what these paths offer is not true Enlightenment but only fleeting power, hubris, and further entanglement in the material world. Many of these misguided souls believed their paths to be superior to that of the Little Teacher, only to be brought low by their own arrogance. Generally speaking, False Paths mitigate or reject attitudes of compassion and questioning. They usually offer a short-cut to Enlightenment, or adopt a stance that supports behaviors of selfishness or even cruelty. Lastly, they tend to be boastful of their superiority to other paths, rejecting the humility that is championed by true followers of Shinsei. Several of the most notable False Paths are discussed in the L5R 4th Edition supplement *Secrets of the Empire*, pages 178–181.

Enlightenment cannot be taught. It is not intellectual in nature and cannot be bestowed through words or actions alone; one cannot teach Enlightenment as one can teach reading, iaijutsu, or calligraphy. One studies the works of Enlightened masters not to be instructed but to glean how they think and perceive the world. The role of the teacher is to guide, not to lead; this is often where False Paths expose themselves.

Teachers of False Paths do great harm to their followers, for they actually hinder or eliminate the possibility of attaining Enlightenment. When one is only a student, it can be difficult to discern the true path from a false one, especially with something as enigmatic as Enlightenment. This is why Shinsei taught not to trust what is written, but to hone one’s own tools for perception, to open oneself to experiences, to eschew patterns of clinging and avoiding, and to question everything.

The Enlightened

“Shinsei is always thinking,” Seppun once remarked. “To the contrary,” Hantei corrected, “Shinsei is never thinking.”

Some believe Enlightenment is a journey, not a destination. Others believe humans are already Enlightened, but most are simply not aware of it. Still others claim everyone is ultimately proceeding towards Enlightenment, but only a handful make that goal before their death and subsequent rebirth, when the soul must begin the journey anew. This understanding is in keeping with the Phoenix Henshin and their belief in the Path of Man, which claims mankind’s destiny is to become a race of Fortunes, liberated from the world of forms.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING ENLIGHTENED?

The Enlightened advantage, on page 148 of the L5R 4th Edition Core Rulebook, represents nearing or even having achieved Enlightenment. This mostly grants justifications for story and character development; astute players will notice that, aside from a character-advancement benefit, there are no in-play benefits to taking the Advantage. Some may wonder whether there should be more mechanical benefits to playing an Enlightened samurai.

For a detailed description of further mechanical advantages for Enlightenment, empty your mind of all thought and desire, and then see page 216.

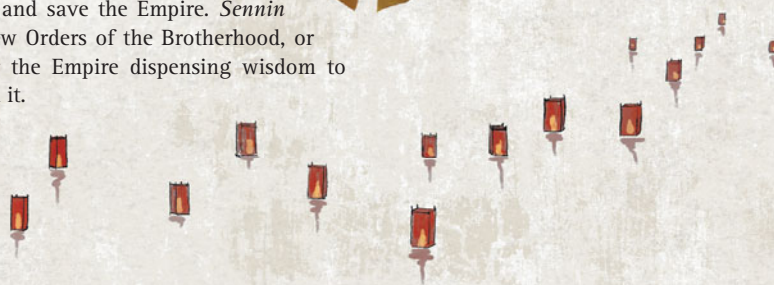


Gaining insight into one’s past lives can considerably advance one along this path. By awakening one’s memories of these past lives, one regains all of those experiences and the insight they can bring. Because of this, many sects (including the Henshin) actively seek to recall past lives. Those who do recall their past lives are known as *samasu*. It is not required to become a *samasu* before becoming Enlightened, but in some sects it is itself considered a form of Enlightenment.

One who finally achieves *daigo* and final, complete Enlightenment is known as a *noshin*. The *noshin* are said to become one with the Void; liberated from the cycle of rebirth and dying, they cease to have physical form and vanish from this plane of reality. What becomes of them is not objectively known, but many believe such beings ascend to the Celestial Heavens, becoming like Fortunes.

However, some who attain Enlightenment elect to remain in the world of forms in order to lead others to the path. Having achieved mastery over the karmic wheel, these souls can choose to be reborn while retaining memories of their prior lives. These reborn eternal beings are called *sennin*.

Sennin are considered by many to be the pinnacle of the monastic orders. They are the most noble of beings, having accomplished ultimate liberation and then effectively giving up the reward in order to help others. Shinsei himself is believed to be the first *sennin*; having achieved Enlightenment, he remained in the physical realm to guide the Kami to understanding and save the Empire. *Sennin* often found new Orders of the Brotherhood, or simply wander the Empire dispensing wisdom to those who seek it.



The Keeper of Void

In the year 1166, the descendent of Shinsei, a man named Rosoku, came out of his seclusion. He felt the Empire was in danger of losing its way and needed to be reminded of the wisdom of Shinsei. To do this, he offered six challenges to be completed, with the winners gaining access to books of sacred wisdom and becoming the Elemental Keepers. (More details on these challenges can be found in the L5R 4th Edition supplement *Emerald Empire*, page 75.)

The fifth challenge, which concerned the Void, was both the simplest and the most complex. It simply needed someone to accomplish a task greater than whatever had been accomplished in the course of the previous four challenges. As the other Elemental Keepers were chosen one by one, many samurai threw themselves into feats of martial prowess, asceticism, mystical study, or creative art, hoping to somehow attain the wisdom of the Void. Although in the end only one man succeeded, many great things were accomplished by this challenge.

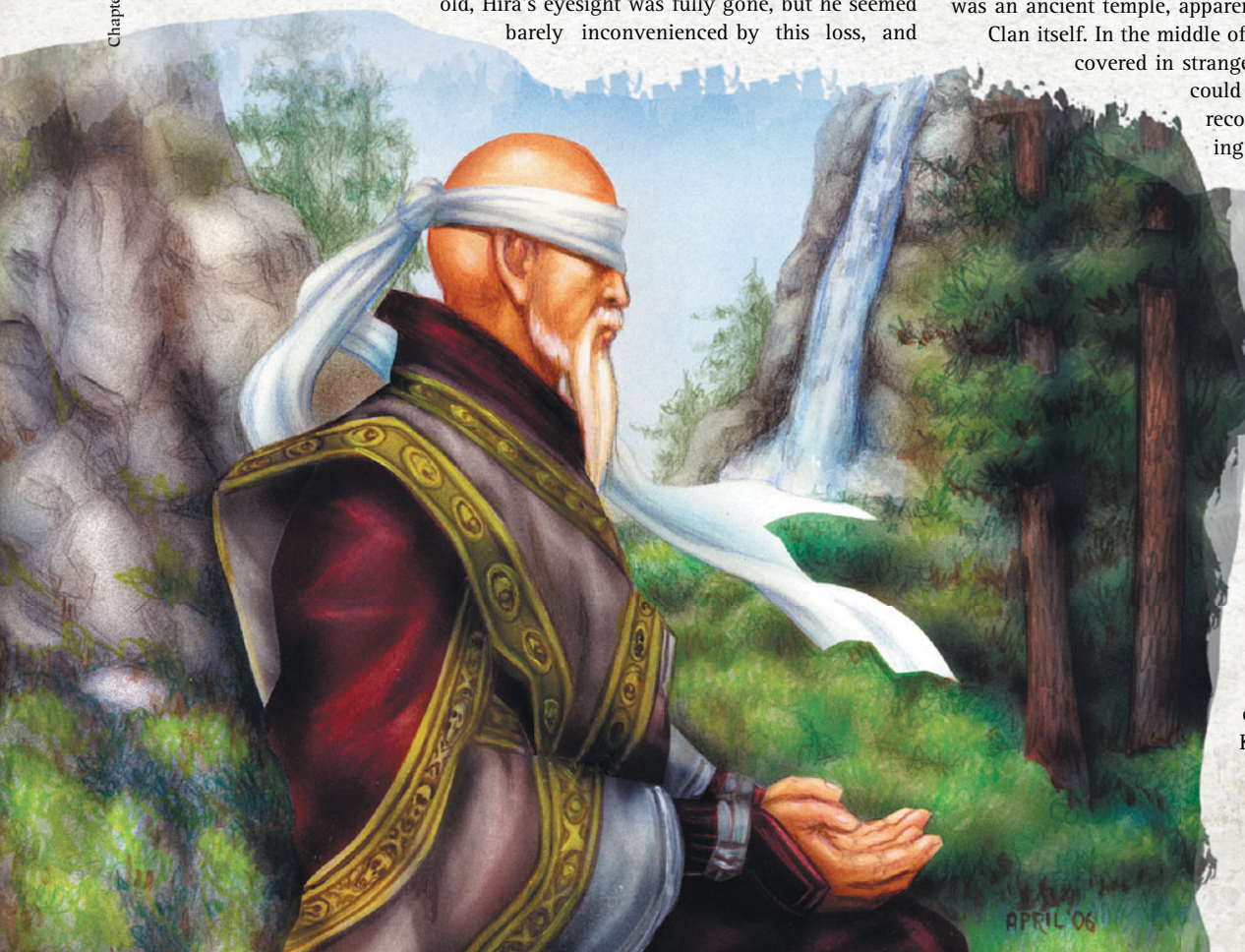
Asahina Hira would never have considered himself a candidate for the position of Keeper of the Void, despite his natural connection to the Element. Hira was born the youngest son of a talented Asahina shugenja-ko and a ronin shugenja who had distinguished himself healing wounded samurai after battle. From an early age he shared his parents' talent for healing, but he also suffered from extremely bad eyesight. By the time he was thirty years old, Hira's eyesight was fully gone, but he seemed barely inconvenienced by this loss, and

could still cast spells and even perform a tea ceremony without a single misstep. Hira was pleased but also quite surprised by this gift, and began researching his family's personal history. What he found surprised him even more: his father was actually Isawa Nariaki, a powerful Void shugenja from the sixth century who had returned to Rokugan through Oblivion's Gate. During his lifetime, Nariaki had suffered such disgrace that he was submitted to the Forgetting, the Phoenix ritual which permanently removed a shugenja's ability to communicate with the kami. Having recovered his abilities through his resurrection, Nariaki attempted to atone for his past sins through a life as a healer, and gladly took the chance to marry into the Asahina.

It became clear to Hira that he had inherited his father's abilities with the Void, which allowed him to compensate for the loss of his sight. Not wishing to attract the attention of the Phoenix Clan to the odd history of his family, Hira decided to train himself to become proficient in Void magic. It took him years and great patience, but he was eventually able to master the ways of Void magic to at least some degree. Outwardly, he remained a simple court shugenja whose magical gifts allowed him to serve despite his blindness.

By chance, Hira was sent to Shiro Ichiro in the company of a minor courtier named Doji Koin. At the time, there was contention about whether the Badger Clan should retain its status as a Minor Clan or be disbanded. The first four Keepers of the Elements also visited the clan, and their presence helped the Badger to finally defeat the threat from the spawn of Hideo no Oni which still wandered their lands. The site of the final battle with the oni was an ancient temple, apparently older than the Badger Clan itself. In the middle of the temple was a column,

covered in strange characters which no one could interpret. Hira, however, recognized the writing as being the language of the kami, and realized the temple marked the grave of Ryoshun, the Tenth Kami whose existence had remained unknown through the first eleven centuries of the Empire's history. The Empire quickly agreed the Badger Clan must be preserved so it could continue to protect this sacred site. Hira, having saved an entire Minor Clan from destruction, discovered the Book of Void within the temple. He had fulfilled the fifth challenge and become the Keeper of Void.



Hira's life took an interesting turn after he was revealed as the fifth Keeper, for he could no longer keep his abilities as a Void shugenja a secret. This caused much consternation in the Phoenix Clan, who were not only amazed someone had mastered the gifts of an Ishiken without training, but also deeply disappointed that none of the five Keepers had come from their clan. However, the political clout of the Crane Clan combined with the Keepers' status as heroes of the Empire and Enlightened men and women made it difficult for the Phoenix to make any sustained attacks on Hira.

As the oldest of the five Elemental Keepers and the first to be a shugenja, Hira became a liaison between the group and Rokugan's priesthood. Hira also helped establish good relations with the Brotherhood of Shinsei, some of whom initially viewed the new group with suspicion. Within the Keepers, Hira acted naturally as a mediator, being both the oldest and the one with the most exposure to the powers of the Elements. He rarely intervened unless requested, but when necessary he acted as a balancing element between the other Keepers, whose diverse personalities could sometimes lead them into conflict. In many ways, Hira became like the Void itself for the Elemental Keepers, at times being almost unnoticed yet connecting and uniting them into a greater whole.

The Book of Void

By far the most complex and esoteric of the Books of the Elements, the Book of Void is as enigmatic as its namesake. It is utterly disorganized, a seemingly random collection of koans, parables, and philosophical essays, making it quite difficult to read. It almost seems to be an addendum to the other books, as if the descendants of Shinsei used it for anything they could not fit into any of the others. And yet, reading it does provide one with deeper understanding and a sense of harmony and serenity. While the other Keepers were known to add to the contents of their Books themselves, Hira never did so. When asked why, he simply said a blind man could not write – despite the fact he could do many other things seemingly impossible without sight. Hira was very fond of letting others read passages of the Book to him – his fellow Keepers, ordinary samurai, or even commoners who knew how to read. In this way Hira allowed part of Shinsei's wisdom to spread through the world again.

In game-mechanical terms, the owner of the Book of Void gains a +1k1 bonus to all Void rolls, including Skill rolls that use the Void Ring (such as Meditation). This bonus increases to +2k1 while Contesting any roll involving the Void Ring. However, if the Book of Void is not consulted and meditated upon at least once every two days, these bonuses are lost.

The Keeper of Void, however, receives the above bonus at all times regardless of how often he or she consults the text. In addition, the Keeper receives other beneficial effects from a deeper understanding of the Void. These are not mechanically defined and can be chosen by the GM to suit the style of a particular campaign. Possible examples could include the ability to cast low level Void spells or access to extra Void points each day.

PASSAGES FROM THE BOOK OF VOID

“A madman cannot trust what he sees, hears, or smells. Yet he does not know that he is mad, and what he perceives is his own reality. How can we know, then, anything to be true?”

“Each time you sleep, you die. Each time you wake up, you are born.”

“Do not look for wisdom in scrolls or books. Everything written here is a lie. Find truth by yourself or you shall never learn a thing.”

“The wisest of men know they know nothing.”

“The nature of the Void is no more a mystery than the nature of Fire, Air, Earth, or Water. It simply is. Men look for proof of this through their entire lives, never noticing they are the proof.”





THE WORLD IS NOT THE WORLD

"Have you ever heard the story of the founding of our village?" the old man asked.

The children seated before him shook their heads.

"No? Well, why do you think our village is named Karasu no Mura?"

Many of the children looked confused. But one young girl spoke: "Um... because of the crows?"

The old man smiled. "That is the answer most would give. Well done, little one." The girl's broke out in an enormous grin. After a moment the old man continued: "However, the fact that crows roost nearby is only part of the reason the village is named as it is. It all began a long time ago with a single man named Karasu, the Crow..."

"No one knows where Karasu came from, but they all agree that when he saw our little valley, he knew it would make a great spot for a village. Our water is clean and our soil is fertile. But there was one problem, a big problem; a group of bandits was camped in the valley. The bandits had been raiding the trade road and the nearby villages for months and had nearly killed off the local population of crows.

"Karasu explored the area around the village and discovered the Hill Cave. He stayed there and did what he could to drive the bandits from the valley. Now, that was easier said than done! Karasu was a simple peasant like we are and wasn't trained in weapons and war like a samurai. He had to find other ways.

"He started by sneaking close to their camp and listening to their plans. Then he travelled around a lot, warning the

villages and caravans about the bandits' plans. They were prepared and the bandits' raids failed terribly! Soon the bandits were down to just two men. All the rest were dead, captured, or had run away when things went wrong.

"The two men began making plans to recruit new bandits, but Karasu could not let that happen. Then he made a mistake. Some say he stepped on a twig and then the bandits knew he was there. Karasu ran and hid in the Hill Cave, but the bandits followed and cornered him. Back then, the slope leading down into the Hill Cave was steeper and longer, we hadn't built the field above it yet.

"The bandits didn't want to venture down into a dark cave, so they decided it would be safer to just roll boulders down into the cave and block Karasu inside. Their mistake, heh heh heh! They found a large boulder nearby, probably half the size of a man, and rolled it down the hill toward the cave mouth. It picked up speed until it hit the steep part halfway down the hill... and then it started to slow down. Then it stopped right in front of the cave mouth. Karasu peeked his head out and pushed on the boulder, and it suddenly started to roll back up the hill! One of the bandits was standing on the ridge, searching the top of the hill for more stones, and the boulder crashed into him and killed him instantly.

"The other bandit fled, and Karasu was victorious. He gained permission from the lord to found our village in the valley. It was all thanks to his amazing cleverness... and to our crazy Hill Cave."



PLACES OF THE VOID?

What does a place being closely connected to the Void actually mean?

In some cases it means those who visit might have visions of the past, present, or future. It might mean all who are in that location feel a sense of peace. In some places it might be easier to concentrate on crafting or art. In others there is no tangible difference, but Ishiken can feel and utilize the connection to the Void more easily. In sum, just as the Void itself is impossible to easily define, there is no catch-all explanation of what a place being connected to the Void really means.

Mechanically, a GM might choose to make it easier to Meditate or regain Void Points within an area strong in the Void. Or, the GM might allow Void Points to be more effective in such a place, or even to grant their benefits without actually being spent. Casting Void spells might be easier, with a lower TN or even a Free Raise. Creative GMs can doubtless come up with other ways to signify a strong connection to the Void in a specific location.

The Natural World of the Void

Since the Void is both everywhere and nowhere at once, it could easily be that there is no place in the Empire more strongly (or more weakly) affiliated with the Void. If one looks at things from a philosophical or analytical viewpoint, this may actually be true; however, there are in fact places in the Empire where the Void “bleeds through” into what mortals consider reality, places where it is easier to access the Void. These locations are unparalleled spots for both artistry and meditation, and while some of them are not all that surprising, others are where one would least expect them to be.

Forges

Craftsmen and artists are generally more in touch with the Void than other samurai, and few craftsmen are more in touch with the Void than those who craft katana. While all physical objects in Rokugan are affiliated with at least one Element (and usually two or more), there are very few physical objects which are infused with the Void. A properly crafted katana is one of those rare objects. Although forges are most closely associated with Fire, the fact that a craftsman must be in close connection to the Void when creating a proper katana can often create a temporary connection between the craftsman’s forge and the Void itself. In places where katana have been crafted for many generations, that connection can become permanent.

THE SOULS OF HONOR FORGE

The Souls of Honor forge in the town of Nikatoshi, in the lands of the Akodo, is one of the forges in Rokugan which is closely associated with the Void. The master blade smiths who have operated the forge for centuries have crafted all the fine blades the Lion lords present to their closest retainers, and a few of their most magnificent blades have been claimed by the daimyo themselves. The focus and attention to detail of the smiths at the Soul of Honor is legendary, among both the Lion and the Empire, and has caused the workroom of the forge to become closely aligned with the Void.

THE GREAT FORGE

The Great Forge of the Crab in Kaiu Shiro is one of the oldest continually operating forges in the Empire. It may be the oldest in the latter half of the twelfth century, after Otosan Uchi is lost. Literally millions of weapons have been forged in its work-chambers, and thousands of supremely skilled craftsmen have worked within its stone walls. It is in the Great Forge that virtually every katana given to a member of the Crab Clan is created, and





where every one of the legendary Kaiu Blades is born. While the entire forge is closely connected to the Void, the smaller forge where the Kaiu Blades are crafted is home to the strongest connection.

STEEL CRANE FORGE

The Steel Crane Forge, in the lands of the Kakita, is another of the great forges in the Empire which is very closely associated with the Void. Where the other great forges are places of toil and look much as one would imagine a forge should look, the Steel Crane Forge is a place of reverence as well as labor. The forge resembles a shrine, and in many ways that is exactly what it is. Every Kakita Blade that has ever been crafted was born within its pristine walls, along with a large proportion of the mundane katana used by the Crane. The forge itself is very closely associated with the Void, but so too is the small mine beneath it where the Crane get the extremely pure iron ore which they use to create the steel for the fabled Kakita Blades.

THE AGASHA/TAMORI FOUNDRY

While the Foundry below Shiro Tamori (Shiro Agasha prior to the Hidden Emperor era) is most closely associated with the Elements of Fire and Earth, there are a few places within it where the touch of the Void

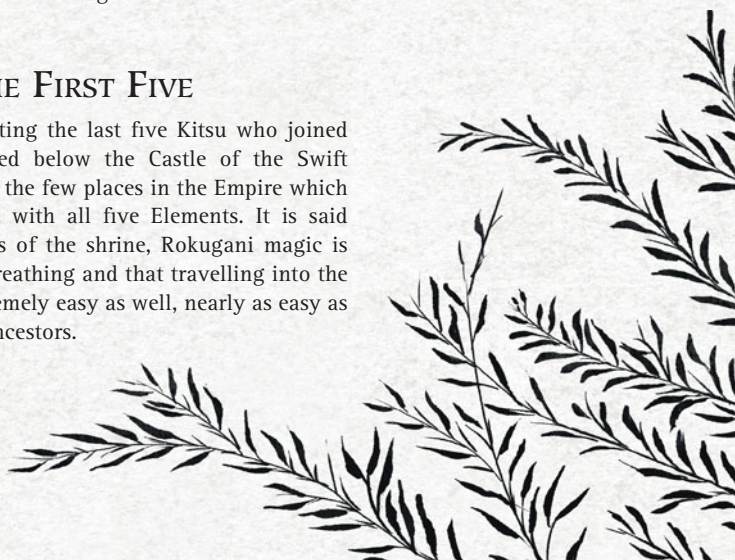
is strong. There are several rooms within the Foundry where the Tamori (and the Agasha before them) plan their experiments, and some of these places over time have gained a close connection to the Void.

Temple and Shrines

The places in the Empire that most scholars would readily agree to be closely associated with the Void are its temples and shrines. While it is true that some of them are indeed linked with the Void, this is not true of every single shrine and temple in the Empire, or even of a majority of them. Still, many of them do form a connection, and the following section lists the more notable examples.

SHRINE OF THE FIRST FIVE

The shrine venerating the last five Kitsi who joined the Empire is located below the Castle of the Swift Sword, and is one of the few places in the Empire which is closely associated with all five Elements. It is said that within the walls of the shrine, Rokugani magic is as easy to work as breathing and that travelling into the Spirit Realms is extremely easy as well, nearly as easy as within the Hall of Ancestors.





KOTEN

The Crab are not known for introspection. There are few places in the Crab lands where you can find a Crab deep in meditation or contemplation, but the shrine called Koten – a fortress-temple dedicated to the clan's fallen ancestors – is one such place. Within the walls of Koten, even the most boisterous Crab warrior turns his thoughts toward the sacrifices so many of his brethren have made in service to the Empire. Koten probably has the strongest connection to the Void of any place in Crab lands, even more so than the Great Forge.

TEMPLE OF THE SEVEN DRAGONS

Located in the City of Remembrance in Phoenix lands, this temple is another rare location where all five Elements are present in great strength. The power of the Celestial Realm is closely linked to this place, and the Elemental Dragons – especially the Dragon of Void and the Dragon of Thunder – are known to make visitations here with some regularity. As noted in Chapter Two, during the twelfth century one of these visitations gives rise to the elite order known as the Dragon Channelers.

Castles

While Rokugan has no shortage of castles, most of them are dedicated to martial or political pursuits, and are hardly the sort of places likely to create a strong association with the Void. There are, however, a small number of castles within the Empire where spirituality is as much of a priority as defense, and where the Void has drawn close in response.

PALE OAK CASTLE

Pale Oak Castle, in the lands of the Phoenix, is one of the most defensible castles in the Empire, but is also a place where samurai show great reverence. The Great White Oak that grows within the castle is a source of amazing spiritual power and purity, and its location is

marked by a strong connection to the Void. Within the rest of the castle the influence of the Void is lessened but still tangible.

OTOSAN UCHI

Otosan Uchi is the capital of the Empire for over 1100 years, and the presence of so many Emperors, priests, and monks for so long gave rise to many specific locations in the Void, scattered throughout the city and its environs. Many of the temples (with the notable exception of the Temple of Daikoku) have rooms or groups of rooms where monks have meditated for centuries, bringing those places closer to the Void. The Imperial Throne Room itself is a place close to the other Spirit Realms, and this connection also strengthens its association with the Void.

After the city is destroyed during the Four Winds era, most of these locations lose their connection to the Void. However, the linkages never wholly disappear, and some are renewed by the Oriole Clan when it rebuilds some of its forges within the ruins.

KYUDEN ISAWA

The home of the Empire's most powerful shugenja family is not actually known as a place for contemplation and introspection. Rather, within its walls is a constant bustle of mystical activity – new spells are created, new scrolls and nemuranai are crafted, and young shugenja are constantly being trained. All these activities create stronger connections to the Void. Of course, the city is also home to the largest numbers of ishiken to be found anywhere in the Empire, and in the places where they gather the power of the Void is strong indeed.

THE HIGH HOUSE OF LIGHT

At times it seems that the lands of the Dragon Clan might vanish entirely into the Void, so introspective and spiritual is the clan. As it is, there are more places within the mountains of the Dragon that are associated with the Void than in any other clan's lands. The strongest connection is naturally within the High House of Light, the seat of the Kami Togashi. Togashi spent centuries within those walls, peering through the Void and into the myriad of possible futures, and this activity created a powerful connection between his castle and the Void. Even after Togashi's spirit finally departs for the Heavens, his power lingers in the mystical tattoos of the clan's monastic order, and helps to keep the Void's influence strong.

YARUKI JUKKO NO TERA

The Temple of Courageous Reflection is a small and somewhat mysterious temple in the lands of the Matsu. It was once dedicated to the Fortunes and was later re-



dedicated to Shinsei. In the area surrounding the temple, the connection between the kami and Rokugan is much stronger than it is in the rest of the Empire. Shugenja and monks have studied the phenomenon, but only the ishiken have reached any conclusions, and they do not share their thoughts. Somehow, the grounds upon which the temple rests are naturally connected to the Void, and this connection allows the Elemental kami to manifest more strongly here, as well as giving rise to a passage between Ningen-do and Chikushudo in the nearby woods.

REIHADO UIKKU

The shrine in Phoenix lands where the prophet Uikku lived is itself only moderately associated with the Void, but there is an unremarkable location on the surrounding plains where the connection is extremely strong. Supposedly, this was the place where Uikku was first discovered, babbling his strange prophecies.

THE TOMB OF RYOSHUN

The place where the body of the lost Kami Ryoshun supposedly fell to earth, located within the lands of the Badger Clan, is another location strong in the Void. An interesting note is that in this case the connection extends into the sky, perhaps following the path along which the Kami's body fell into Ningen-do.

Natural Formations

There are many natural (or seemingly natural) locations within the Empire which have a close connection to the Void. Whether the connection was formed spontaneously or was manufactured by mortal action depends upon the location. The following are some of the most notable such places in Rokugan.

LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN

On one of the occasions when Isawa's Last Wish was used, a mountain rose in the middle of the plains which border the Lion and Unicorn lands. The Lion claimed the new peak and named it Lookout Mountain. Soon after, the mountain also attracted the attention of the Zokujin, the so-called "copper goblins."

While the mountain and the lands surrounding it are not strongly associated with the Void, the very heart of the mountain has such a connection. Deep within the peak is a chamber where the Void is extremely strong. Whether this was caused by the Last Wish's act of creation or whether it was always there, deep beneath the ground, is unknown. The Rokugani have not yet discovered this chamber, but the Zokujin have found it and treat it with great reverence. The walls and floor of the room are lined with copper ore and gemstones. The wisest of the zokujin often spend days or weeks in the chamber, doing something that can only be described as meditation.

ISAWA MORI

While the Isawa Mori is a forest full of mystery and wonder, the entirety of it is not closely associated with the Void. However, deep within the Isawa Mori is the place called the Heart of Nature, where passages to several different Spirit Realms have formed. The Heart was forged out of a strong Void influence, allowing many passages to so many different realms to form and remain over time.

BUNYA SANO ASAHINA

The connection to the Void in the Fields of the Morning Sun, in the lands of the Crane, appears to be a natural one. Pilgrims travel every year to meditate on the fields, enjoying the feeling of serenity and harmony which exists there. The same sense of harmony caused the Crane Clan to construct a temple to Jurojin at the site.

THE PIT

In the lands of the Kuni is a peculiar natural formation which they simply call the Pit. On the outskirts of the mining village of Midaki sano Mura is a large open chasm. The sides of the chasm are too sheer to scale, though some have tried (and failed). As far as the Kuni can discern, the Pit is bottomless. They have ruled out the Taint as the source of the phenomenon, but otherwise the Pit has baffled them for centuries. Miners in the nearby village have been dumping scrap stone into the Pit for centuries, and it shows no sign of filling. Deep within the Pit is a gate to one of the Spirit Realms – it is unclear which. The presence of the spirit portal also signals a strong affiliation with the Void.

CHINSEI MORI

A place of calm and peace in the lands of the Tsuruchi, Chinsei Mori is a small forest noted for its almost unnatural serenity. It owes that serenity at least in part to a strong naturally-occurring connection to the Void.

SEPPUN HILL

Located within the boundaries of Ootosan Uchi is the hill where the Kami landed when they first fell to Ningen-do. It is a place very close to the Void, though it is difficult to say whether this is due to the touch of the Kami or because of the spiritual devotion of the thousands of pilgrims who have visited the site since then.

KITSUNE MORI

The forest of the Kitsune is strongly linked to the Spirit Realm of Chikushudo, with many portals between the two. This naturally causes the forest to also be strong in the Void.





Villages

Even places as mundane and worldly as simple peasant villages can sometimes have a close connection to the Void. In many cases, this connection is formed by the inhabitants themselves, but there are also instances where villages were simply built atop locations which were already naturally strong in the Element.

SHINSEI NO SUMAI MURA

Sumai Mura was a village in the lands of the Phoenix during the dawn of the Empire. The inhabitants of the place were known for their arrogance and decadence, but that changed when Shinsei lived there for two months and showed the people the error of their ways. The villagers wanted to change the name of their town to signify their change of heart, but Shinsei asked them not to. That way, they would never forget what they were and would always struggle to be better. Ultimately, the villagers compromised by adding the Little Teacher's name to the existing name of their town. Later, they built a shrine to Shinsei that became a destination for pilgrims seeking introspection, meditation, and contemplation. Unsurprisingly, the shrine has come to be closely associated with the Void.

VILLAGE OF THE GRAND SONG

There is a single dojo in the Mantis lands which teaches the fine arts: the Grand Song Dojo. It was founded on a small southern island by a Mantis samurai who discovered he had no talent for war or speaking with the spirits, but was extremely talented in the art of singing. He made this weakness into a strength, and the Mantis Champion at the time, the legendary Gusai, rewarded him for it by granting him lands and a dojo.

On all of the Islands of Silk and Spice, the Village of the Grand Song is probably the only place built for art and introspection. The creation of so much art in such a small location has attuned the entire island to the Void.

SHINSEI'S LAST HOPE

One would not expect to find a location linked to the Void inside of the Shadowlands, but Shinsei's Last Hope is not a normal place. Supposedly, Shinsei himself told the Crab Clan that so long as this village did not fall to the Shadowlands, the Empire would survive. Because of that prophecy, Shinsei's Last Hope is one of the best defended villages in all of Rokugan, and Shinsei's words have somehow made the town immune to the encroachments of the Taint.

Shinsei's Last Hope sits on the coast of the Shadowlands, quite a distance from the Crab lands and the rest of the Empire, but it remains untouched by the Taint. The Kuni believe Shinsei's influence created a connection to the Void that, in turn, strengthens the local Earth spirits to resist Jigoku's influence. Of course, the Crab do not

rely solely on this mystical protection – the village is massively fortified and heavily garrisoned.

YUSHOSHA SEIDO MURA

Yushosha Seido Mura is a village located in the Dragon lands, at the halfway point between the High House of Light and the major Dragon city of Heibusu. The only thing of note that happens in the village is that various clan leaders and emissaries pass through on occasion; otherwise, it seems an unremarkable village on unremarkable land. However, before his twelfth-century death the Kami Togashi spent a great deal of time within the village in his various false identities. (This sometimes led others to speculate that it was the place of the Dragon Champion's birth, not realizing he was the same Togashi who had always ruled the clan.) In truth, the ground upon which the village was built has a unique connection to the Void, making prophetic visions clearer than they would be elsewhere in the empire. Why this connection exists is unknown.

EAST MOUNTAIN VILLAGE

In the caves near this Crab village is a peculiar connection to the Void. Each year, the Crab send samurai into those caves to find and destroy the Shadowlands creatures that constantly infest them. Each year they exterminate the enemy, and each year they return. No one knows how they got there. Some believe a mahotsukai summons them each year, but the true explanation is much stranger than that. A section of the caves near East Mountain Village resembles a section of caves deep in the Shadowlands so exactly that they might as well be the same place. In fact, as far as the Void is concerned... sometimes they are the same place. Creatures who live in the cave system in the Shadowlands are thus sometimes transported through the Void to the caves outside of East Mountain Village... and samurai exploring the caves are sometimes transported to the Shadowlands.

Outposts

There are a few man-made structures far away from cities and villages which are nonetheless strong in the Void. These places are often extremely significant, though usually in subtle ways.

SHIRO NO SHINJIN

The so-called Castle of the Dead is a small outpost in Akodo lands that houses the notorious Lion Deathseekers. It might seem an unlikely place for a connection to the Void, but those who live there spend much of their time in contemplation. In fact, Deathseekers probably spend more time in meditation than anyone save monks, as they consider their own actions and those which might redeem them in some way. So much introspection in such a small place has created a connection to the Void, although few outside the Deathseekers themselves are aware of this.

ZUMIKI-MIHARI

Zumiki-mihari is a single watchtower in the lands of the Phoenix which looks out over the border between that clan and the lands of the Otomo. Many have questioned why the Phoenix would need to watch the Otomo, but the watchtower has actually become a place of innovation as the Phoenix develop new magical ways to do so. However, the real reason the tower was placed in this location is unknown to all but a few Phoenix daimyo and the Elemental Council.

There is a series of caves beneath the watchtower, accessed through the basement. Within these caves is a chamber where dozens of different natural crystals grow, in all types and sizes. Somehow these crystals focus the Void, and some Phoenix have been able to garner brief glimpses of locations elsewhere in the Empire when meditating for an extended time within the chamber. These rare glimpses are always visions of the present or the very near future, and they make the watchtower quite valuable to the clan.

The Void in the World of Men

Yoji bowed to the servant and knelt on the soft tatami mat. The peasant could see his lord through a gap in the wooden shoji that led outside. Mirumoto Taruo was seated cross-legged on a stone set in the center of the pristine rock garden. His eyes were closed, but he did not seem to be asleep.

The servant returned, bringing tea. Yoji hesitated a moment, then whispered: "How long do you think Mirumoto-sama will be? I have much work remaining to do today."

The servant shrugged, the hint of a sneer curling his mouth. "My lord meditates for several hours a day. It could be some time."

Yoji sighed and settled himself in to wait. Still, he could not help but marvel: several hours a day sitting on a rock? What would that be like? To have that kind of free time... His mind turned back to the village, worrying about the work he should be doing, the tasks his sons would have to perform without him, and of course the tasks that could not be done at all without an answer from Lord Mirumoto Taruo.

Several hours later, Yoji's stomach was grumbling and his worries had grown acute. Still he waited. From the light on the paper walls he could tell the sun was beginning to set. Almost half a day of work time wasted.

In the garden, Mirumoto Taruo stirred and stood from the rock and stretched. A servant slid open the shoji and the samurai strode into the waiting chamber.

"Ah, Yoji-kun. What does my village headman need from me?"

Yoji bowed, his forehead touching the tatami. "My lord, since the river flooded this spring, we find we have waterlogged fields. We seek permission to plant rice instead of soybeans this year." He left unspoken that Taruo would have to find a way to get rice seeds. Their village was hardly wealthy, even by the standards of the Dragon Clan.

The samurai thought for only a moment, then nodded. "Very well, if you think it best. I did sense a disturbance in the area during my meditations."

Whatever that meant. "Of course, my lord," Yoji said placatingly.

The samurai nodded to himself. "You may go."

The old peasant bowed to the floor again, then stood and scurried out of the samurai's home, hoping there was enough light left to get the transition started. Much work would be needed to get the fields ready, and of course Taruo would need to get them rice seeds from somewhere. Yoji certainly could not spare the time to "sense a disturbance." He merely had to live with the results.

Heimin and the Void

"What is the Void?" That is the question samurai, monks, and shugenja in Rokugan have been asking for as long as they have acknowledged the Void exists. Heimin and hinin, on the other hand, rarely have the time or a reason to ask any such question. What use is the Void in planting fields, building a shed, or foraging enough food to survive the winter after bandits stole the harvest? What use is the Void when entertaining samurai or collecting the dead? However, while the heimin and hinin do not think about the Void, that does not necessarily mean they go unaffected by it.

Does the Void affect the lives of the heimin? After all, they do not engage in meditation or contemplation, nor do they train in the Zanshin techniques of the samurai. Nonetheless, Rokugan is a land of magic and spirits, and the Void does have tangible effects on the entire world. For the peasantry of Rokugan, the Void manifests itself most often in rare moments of unexpected excellence. It may be physical excellence; such as the fabled tale of a mother lifting a laden cart off of her trapped child. It may be artistic excellence, such as when a simple carpenter creates a masterpiece when making a mundane piece. It may be practical excellence, such as when a farmer changes the way he arranges his irrigation one year and thus discovers the optimum placement to grow more rice than ever before. These manifestations are simply lower-level versions of what samurai do when they tap into the Void within themselves, but in most cases the credit for such remarkable acts is given to the kami or the Fortunes. The mother might thank Bishamon for granting her the strength to save her child, and the farmer might praise Inari for inspiration, as opposed to a samurai who might thank the Fortunes but would understand that the strength and inspiration to complete the task came from within.



Much like with samurai, some heimin have a stronger connection to the Void than others. Often these peasants become the stuff of local legend. Sometimes their potential is eventually noticed by a samurai and they are raised to the samurai caste, while other times the Brotherhood takes them in and they become famous monks. It is not known whether these peasants have this connection because they are closer to cleansing their karma and being reborn as samurai, or whether it is due to the inscrutable whims of the Void itself. Regardless, they are generally an asset to the peasantry and to Rokugan as a whole. Now and then, however, a peasant with this connection is born who turns to evil or banditry. These heimin become true scourges on the Empire, turning into legendary pirates, terrible bandit lords, or leading violent rebellions against the samurai caste.

A PEASANT LEGEND: THE WOODSMAN

In the peasant villages of the Unicorn lands, on the edges of the Shinomen Mori, there is a legend of a man called simply "The Woodsman." Supposedly, he was a peasant hunter who was so skilled he could track anything, even the wind. He kept his entire village fed in the coldest winters by hunting animals from the tracks they left before the snow fell. He saved dozens of his fellow villagers who were lost in the woods during a terrible storm, finding them individually and guiding them home. The peasants say the Woodsman never died; he is still out there in the Shinomen, and still sometimes guides the lost home. It is likely this legend was inspired by the deeds of a peasant who had an extraordinary connection to the Void.

A PEASANT LEGEND: THE RICE FARMER

There is a tale about a time when the samurai of the Crane were not quite so courteous toward their peasants. While in most eras the Crane are known for their relatively good treatment of their heimin, there was once a time when decadence abounded in the castles of the Crane while squalor reigned in their villages. Legend tells of a rice farmer in one such village who grew bitterly disillusioned. He was growing enough rice to feed his village for years, but the Crane only allowed him to keep enough for his family to barely stay alive. The farmer complained to the tax collectors and in response they had him beaten. The next year, the weather was bad and the farmer was not able to grow enough rice to pay his taxes and feed his family, so the tax collectors took it all. That night he tracked them down and took back the rice; then he and his family fled into the forest, along with some of the other villagers.

The peasants speak quietly of the great uprising led by the Rice Farmer. They say he brought the Crane to their knees and forced them to realize the peasants were

essential to their own wealth and prosperity. The legend says when a peace was finally made, the Crane Champion raised the Rice Farmer to become a samurai and then allowed him to commit seppuku, accepting blame for the rebellion and sparing the rest of the peasants.

This tale is most likely a romanticized version of a minor peasant uprising led by a heimin who was unusually strong in the Void. There are no historical records of such a major peasant revolt in the Crane lands, nor are there any accounts of a notable period of decadence in Crane history (though the Lion might disagree).

Hinin and the Void

Although most samurai like to ignore the fact that hinin are actually humans, even eta, torturers, and geisha have a connection to the Void. A few radical sages have theorized that eta actually have a slightly stronger connection to the Void than heimin in general, and this helps explain why they tend to stay healthy despite living in extremely filthy conditions. While this may or may not be true, the fact is that eta do indeed tend to survive despite their living conditions and often go all but untouched by plagues that ravage the rest of the population.

While the "typical" eta does little more than collect corpses and refuse, there are other hinin who do perform tasks requiring great skill and focus. Torture is a difficult duty, since it is all too easy to slip up and kill the subject. Leatherworkers are craftsmen in their specialized field. And actors and geisha, of course, are practitioners of the arts as skilled as any in Rokugan. All such tasks offer opportunities for a connection to the Void to manifest in moments of harmonious excellence.

Geisha in particular are often noted for acts which can only be regarded as Void-influenced. Obviously, some of them have a greater connection than others, often evidenced in the prices for their services. Of course, it is an unspoken truth that some geisha are actually the daughters of samurai, which further explains their tendency for a stronger Void connection.

A GEISHA LEGEND: ODORIKO, THE DANCING GIRL

In the willow-world of the geisha, there is a tale of a girl named Odoriko. She was a beautiful teenager from a peasant family in a region stalked by famine. Such a girl might have met with a dire fate in such a dangerous time, but Odoriko was not only pretty, but also clever and talented. She went to the local tea-house and offered to dance for the samurai who came there to drink. Her dancing was so perfect, so entrancing, that soon more and more samurai were coming to the tea-house solely to watch her perform. Within a year, she had earned enough from their tips to buy the tea-house herself. She renamed it The Dancing Girl, and began training other peasant girls in her dancing skills. Odoriko became the first okaasan (madam), and The Dancing Girl was the first okiya (geisha house).



This story is probably apocryphal, but it is possible it draws inspiration from the career of one or more geisha with exceptionally high connections to the Void.

Gaijin and the Void

In the Rokugani view, gaijin do not have souls. They are not part of the Celestial Wheel and cannot be reincarnated into higher stations like a Rokugani. This being the case, is it possible for a gaijin to have any connection to the Void? The Empire's philosophers generally avoid such questions, since gaijin are a distasteful topic which is inappropriate for any honorable person to consider. Still, a few daring scholars have occasionally dabbled in these issues.

One exceptionally radical idea is that even the Rokugani themselves did not have fully developed souls or tangible connections to the Void until Shinsei brought his teachings to them and explained the way the universe truly worked. They believe in it an understanding and belief in the existence of the Void which allows a mortal to connect to the Void. Thus, in a gaijin kingdom where the people do not believe the Void exists, it cannot affect their lives.

A somewhat less extreme view is that a connection to the Void and to the Celestial Wheel comes with a connection to the Kami and the Fortunes. The gaijin do not have a connection to the Void because they live in the wrong part of the world and have not encountered the true forces of the Celestial Heavens.

Finally, a very few people (found within the Unicorn and Tortoise Clans) believe that gaijin do indeed have a connection to the Void – it simply manifests in different ways for them than it does for the Rokugani. Of course, this theory is never discussed in polite company. The very idea that the Void could manifest in a different way outside Rokugan would be considered blasphemous to proper folk, and raises the possibility that gaijin might have souls after all.

Creatures and Otherworldly Beings of Void

"The Void does not mean nothingness. Instead, it suggests that each thing, each being, lacks innate reality, inherent identity, or a natural objectivity. Not possessing such essence does not diminish existence... it merely makes all things relative."

– Shiba Ningen, Master of Void

Each creature, both mundane and supernatural, possesses a strong connection to a particular Element. While it is easy to identify birds with Air and fish with Water, the Void is more difficult to grasp, for the Void is all things and yet none of them. Void is the connective blanket of the night sky between the stars. It ties the

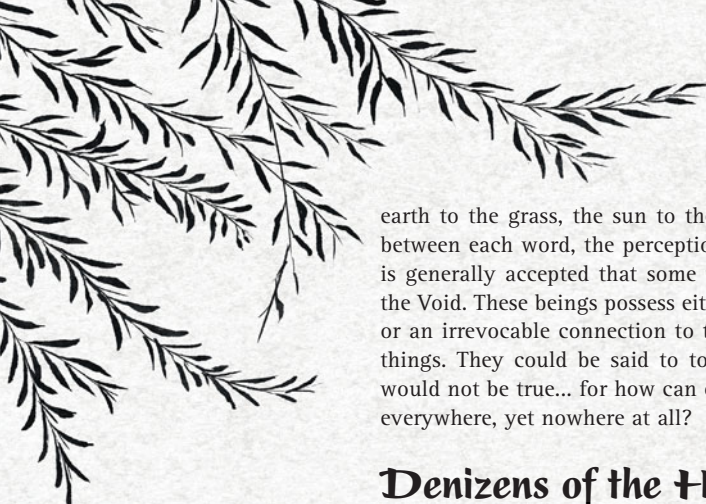
GM's TOOLBOX: VOID ONLY FOR THE ENLIGHTENED

One of the more radical theories of Void suggests a connection with the Void is only formed when someone is cognizant of the fact the Void exists and accepts that belief to be true. What if this were true? Or what if it was even harder than that to have a connection to the Void (and in game mechanics terms, Void Points)?

GMs seeking an unusual approach to L5R role-playing might wish to consider the possibility of a world where Void only influences the lives of those who actively seek it out through meditation or study. (To put it in pop-culture terms, this would make the Void somewhat like the Force in the Star Wars universe – it flows through everything, but can only be accessed by a few.) In such a world only samurai – especially shugenja – and monks would be able to access the Void. Even some of them might not be able to touch it if their lives were focused on violence and lacked any chance for contemplation or study – something which could be mechanically signified by a lack of Ranks in the Meditation Skill.

How much would this change Rokugan? For one thing, it would further deepen the gap between the commoners and their samurai rulers. For another, it would also deepen the gap between the clans. The more pragmatic martial clans, such as the Crab and the Mantis, would have little connection to the Void outside of their shugenja families, while clans like the Phoenix, Dragon, and Crane would be much more strongly associated with it. Traditional rivalries would become far more acute and bitter, since they would be driven not merely by social tradition but also by genuine spiritual differences. Finally, the monks of the Brotherhood of Shinsei would be the subject of far stronger reverence.





earth to the grass, the sun to the air. It is in the space between each word, the perception of all things. Still, it is generally accepted that some things exist “closer” to the Void. These beings possess either an extreme absence or an irrevocable connection to that which connects all things. They could be said to touch the Void, but that would not be true... for how can one touch that which is everywhere, yet nowhere at all?

Denizens of the Heavens

THE THREE GODS WHOSE NAMES CANNOT BE SPOKEN

In the Rokugani story of creation, the universe is given shape, name, and form by Lady Sun and Lord Moon. However, scholars of spiritual creation are vaguely aware of even earlier entities predating these two divinities. These three beings are labeled *Kotoamatsukami* – literally “distinguished heavenly gods.” Each existed and did not exist within the vast Void and from this impossible duality, all was fashioned. They are called the Three Gods Whose Names Cannot Be Spoken because these entities crafted the earth, the spirit realms, and all other things from the forgotten syllables of their names. To remember their true names or speak them aloud would require one to be so enlightened as to be able to experience everything and nothing in all creation simultaneously. A few scholars do refer to them as the Central Master, the Master of Uppermost Creation, and the Master of the Low. However, these terms seem to be a mere human conceit with no real connection to their actual roles in the creation of the universe. In truth, each of these “gods” was so intertwined with the other two that they cannot be considered separately... except by each other.

THE VOID DRAGON

The Void Dragon is a paradox, simultaneously the embodiment of all things and of nothing at all. Void understands better than any other being its place within the Celestial Order. It knows the dangers of its interference and the ramifications of even the tiniest influence placed upon the mortal world. Yet despite this knowledge, the Void Dragon acts more than any other Celestial Dragon, and is responsible for more karmic imbalance than any other creature save man.

Void appears as the darkness between the stars, twin suns glimmering in the sockets of its eyes. The Dragon experiences a kinship with mortals built upon humanity’s inherent possession of all Elements, and it spends considerable time and effort – both through Ryu functionaries and on occasion through its own personal action – speaking with mortals and watching over the affairs of Ningen-Do. Void’s Oracle is also among the more active of the Oracles of Light, most infamously during the Four Winds era when the Oracle Kaede became Empress and her actions created such a huge imbalance in mortal affairs that it gave rise to the first ever Dark Oracle of Void.

Void is an enigma, an inconsistency, a decidedly active yet ambiguous force in the world of mortals. Its influence is rarely seen, seldom understood, frequent and yet incomprehensible, and total in its reach.

THE THUNDER DRAGON

The Dragon of Thunder has never fit into a single role. Not truly a creature of storm, the Thunder Dragon instead takes its name from the mighty heroic potential within each mortal soul. Thunder is the embodiment of power, courage, and strength, and of the potential for greatness each of these traits implies. In fact, the

Thunder Dragon – which identifies itself as female when it takes human form – even spawned a mortal line of heroes with Hida, founder of the Crab; the child of their union became Osano-Wo, the Fortune of Fire and Thunder, and his descendents have ruled both the Crab and the Mantis. Thunder’s Oracle is by far the most active of all the Oracles of Light, far more so than even Void, constantly striving to inspire mankind to achieve its ultimate potential.

Thunder is a being of awesome beauty, her form breathtaking to behold, the inspiration for thousands of works of art. In the late twelfth century, her infinite compassion for humanity even led her to abandon the Celestial Heavens in order to make a place for Yoritomo to ascend as the Mantis Kami. After that time the Thunder Dragon lives in the ocean near the Islands of Spice



and Silk, a former immortal Celestial being in an undying mortal form. Thunder's final fate remains to be seen, though she continues to serve as a patron of heroes and an inspiration for the courage of all samurai.

HANTEI

Hantei Jimmu Tenno was the tenth Kami, the youngest child of the Moon and Sun. When his maddened father devoured Hantei's siblings, Amaterasu deceived Lord Moon and replaced her last child with a stone; thus, Hantei was the only one of his siblings to truly experience the beauty and power of Tengoku. Raised and trained by the Celestial Dragons, he was forged into the perfect warrior, the perfection for which every mortal strives. Many believe him to be the blueprint and mold from which mortal man was created. As a resident of Ningen-do, Hantei won the tournament against his siblings and founded a dynasty which ruled the Empire for over a millennium. Yet not once did Hantei forget the purity of Tengoku, the wonder of the Heavens. His heart called out to the pure Void and when his body died, Hantei was happy to return to his true home.

The first Emperor is the only Kami truly associated with the Void. He is all the things to which humanity strives, yet remains distant and apart, his ways beyond mortal understanding; apart yet together, just as with the Void itself.

RYOSHUN

Ryoshun is often called the Tenth Kami (despite his having been born before his brother Hantei), because his very existence was unknown to the Empire until the twelfth century. Ryoshun was the first Kami devoured by his father Onnotangu, and as a result he had already perished by the time Hantei split open Lord Moon's belly. His spirit fled while his siblings fell to Ningen-do, and mortal man was thus denied awareness of Ryoshun's existence. The dead Kami took up a station between the realms as Guardian of the Rift, watching over the boundary between the Realm of Blessed Ancestors (Yomi) and Jigoku. After Oblivion's Gate was destroyed, Ryoshun took up a new position as Steward of the Dead in Meido, the Realm of Waiting, serving Emma-O by guiding the souls of the dead along their journeys.

Like Hantei, Ryoshun is not associated with other Elements. He is a being of borders, a dead soul with living purpose, a sort of Celestial connective tissue between the different Spirit Realms. His understanding of the connections between all things and the parts they play within the Celestial Order is unmatched. Where the other Kami are a wondrous beacon to guide mortals (and Fu Leng was a malignant darkness controlled by the will of Jigoku), Ryoshun is the sinuous connection between Yin and Yang. Denied Tengoku, denied life, with no Great Clan or faction of followers to his name, Ryoshun still serves unasked... and will continue to do so for eternity.



EMMA-O, FORTUNE OF DEATH

The Lord of Meido shares many qualities in common with Ryoshun. Like the Tenth Kami, Emma-O is a Celestial being permanently disconnected from Tengoku. He serves at Heaven's behest, but Meido is not the idealized realm of the other Fortunes and the Dragons. Meido and Emma-O are both free of Elemental association, formed from the Void and the purposes of Celestial will. The Lord of the Dead is the embodiment of judgment, reincarnation, and endless waiting. Just as there can be no cycle of reincarnation without death, there can be no ascension, no punishment, no karmic wheel, no change at all without the Lord of the Dead. His position is the thick strand of Void that connects all things, knotted irrevocably within mortal affairs. There can be no creation without the Void, no joy without sorrow, and no life without death.





Supernatural Beings Associated with Void

KITSU

The Kitsune were originally one of the legendary Five Ancient Races (described in the L5R 4th Edition supplement *Enemies of the Empire*, page 185). Each of their brethren who emerged from the primal chaos of creation was associated strongly with an Element: the Kenku with Air, the Zokujin with Earth, the Trolls with Fire, and the Ningyo with Water. The Kitsune, however, were shapeshifters, mortal manifestations of Void, connected to all things. These ancient beings were attuned to every Spirit Realm, to every living thing, and served as guardians and guides for the other four Ancient Races. The Kitsune helped shape the mortal realm of Ningen-do, and continued to live there after the fall of the City of Night that ended their civilization.

The remaining Kitsune were all but annihilated by Lord Akodo, who mistook them for creatures of the Shadowlands. Eventually he learned of his folly and sought to correct it by accepting the last five Kitsune into his clan as spiritual advisors, marrying them to his daughters. In modern Rokugan, the true Kitsune are but a memory, a shadow of the Void in mortal form.

RYU OF VOID

The Ryu are dragon spirits of Tengoku, described in the L5R 4th Edition supplement *Enemies of the Empire* (page 254). The Ryu of the Void Dragon mimic their patron in appearance: usually hidden from view, they appear only as an inky black silhouette, twisting ever inwards. Their eyes are twin stars in the ceaseless depth of the night sky, sparkling with interest in mortal affairs. Ryu of the Void enjoy the experiences of humanity, the fleeting world that is mortality, and share the same curiosity for mortals as their creator. In nearly all cases, when the Void Dragon's touch is felt upon the mortal realm it is through a Ryu of Void, often one newly-spawned for that purpose.

Because of this, if left to their own devices after the completion of their task these Ryu are more likely than others to remain in Ningen-do and observe mortal affairs.

Shadowlands Creatures Associated with Void

GREATER ELEMENTAL TERROR OF VOID

The Akeru no Oni is a festering wound upon the very essence of the Celestial Wheel. Easily the most dangerous of the Elemental Terrors, the Akeru was brought into being during the twelfth century, requiring the combined power of all four existing Dark Oracles to create it. (The Dark Oracle of Void did not come into being until a half-century later.) The Akeru no Oni is not the largest, fastest, smartest, or most fearsome of the Terrors; its horror exists on a separate level entirely, for Akeru no Oni is the only creature of the Shadowlands known to be capable of interacting with the Void. It is a dark and terrible assassin, a spy, the tool of the most powerful servants of Jigoku.

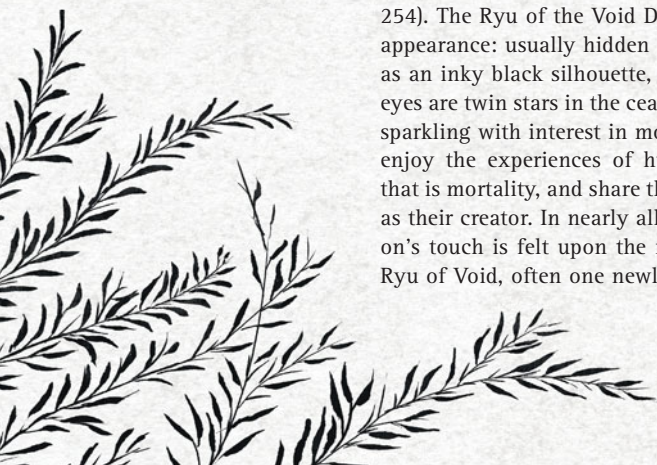
The Akeru's name means to clear out, to empty, to open, or to "void" another. The demon subsists upon the stolen essence of others. It is a thief of karma, thriving upon the expenditure of Void, a parasite on the world between worlds. It possesses the power of total annihilation, capable of turning stolen Void back upon its enemy. Worst of all, a creature slain by its power is erased permanently, removed forever from the cycle of death and rebirth – a doom almost incomprehensible to the Rokugani.

Physically, the Akeru no Oni appears as a mass of rippling dark energy formed into the rough shape of a clawed beast with an insectoid head. The creature hides in shadows and darkness until it attacks, at which time a sort of "negative light" exudes from its form. It has no voice, lips, or tongue; its words are simply felt within the mind, a painful telepathy that jars the mortal mind and leaves it disoriented.

LESSER ELEMENTAL TERROR OF VOID

The Kukanchi no Kansen are an enigma to mortal minds: beings of twisted "void" that is yet not truly the Void. The Kukanchi come into being as the remnants of souls left behind after the more powerful Akeru no Oni uses its most vicious attack. The Akeru rips its victims from the Celestial Wheel, and the wisps of nothing left behind transform themselves into these tiny servants of Jigoku. Kukanchi are rarely seen, never heard, and even when perceived they are only a dark smear upon the fabric of existence.

The Kukanchi possess a natural curiosity derived from their brief touch with the dark side of the Void. They serve as the eyes and ears of powerful masters (such as the Dark Oracles, the Akeru no Oni, or powerful Lost and maho-tsukai). They revel in the corruption of others and are happiest when their tasks involve leading mortals into the grasp of Jigoku.



Mundane Creatures of Void

BUTTERFLY (CHO)

Unlikely though it may seem, there is some consensus among the Rokugani that a particular “common” creature embodies the Void. “*The soul of a living person may wander about in the form of a butterfly,*” writes the monk Kaideo in his famous collection of supernatural tales. It is a commonly held belief that butterflies may embody both the souls of the living and of the dead. The creatures exist in an infinite array of colors and patterns, the perfect physical embodiment of the human soul, itself an expression of the Void. Thus, to harm one is to surely damn one’s own soul to a harsh punishment.

Butterflies are seen as having both virtuous and ominous aspects, and are often believed to house the souls of the recently departed, lingering briefly before departing for Meido. For example, if a butterfly enters one’s room and lands behind the privacy screen, it is the soul of a dead lover coming to visit. At weddings, paper butterflies are supposed to represent the hope that the couple will pass through life as a pair of butterflies passes through a pleasant garden, twisting and turning but always landing together. On the other hand, there is a tale of a peasant revolt in the northern Crane lands halted by an alarming visitation of butterflies. On the eve of a revolution, large-winged butterflies were seen in tremendous numbers – a vast swarm floating over the angered peasants. The creatures were perceived as evil portents of the thousands of heimin doomed to perish in battle, and the rebels gave up their plans in the face of such a terrible prediction.

Whether or not the butterfly can truly be considered a creature of Void is unknown. What is certain is that the mysteries which surround it are surely worthy of the Void’s own enigmatic nature.

CROW (KARASU)

Shinsei’s faithful companion may or may not be an embodiment of the Void, but there is no doubting the crow is considered a symbol of Enlightenment. The Brotherhood of Shinsei regards the creature as a guide, and images of crows are often used as symbols of the Brotherhood as a whole. Heimin and samurai alike regard crows as foretellers of danger, birds of omen granting helpful warnings of tumultuous times ahead.

In modern retellings of the First Day of Thunder, Shinsei’s original crow is depicted as a beautiful bird resplendent with color. The crow serves

THE BUTTERFLY DANCE

The butterfly sleeps

Perched upon the temple bell

Whose spirit, I must wonder

The symbolism of butterflies can be seen in many places, such as the famous play by Shosuro Kanzashi: The Flying Hairpin of Kocho. In the play the beautiful Kocho kills herself because of cruel treatment and false accusations of adultery. Her avenger seeks in vain for the villain responsible. In the end, the dead woman’s hairpin turns into a beautiful white butterfly and guides the avenging samurai to the masked villain, assuring his demise.

At its debut, the play so inspired the Imperial Court that ever since a dance called the *Kocho-Mai* (Butterfly Dance) has been performed annually at the Imperial Palace. Six dancers dress in elaborate costume, moving through highly ritualized poses, gestures, and steps to the music of whistling flutes and slow-beating hand-drums.



as a guide for the Little Teacher and the Seven Thunders in their journey to confront Fu Leng. However, once it returned to Rokugan the bird was permanently marred by its time within the Shadowlands, its rainbow plumage solidified into simple black.



Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things

When asked the meaning of dreams, Shinsei said: "If only men put so much thought into what they see when they are awake."

In Rokugani, tales of honor coexist with rumors of the supernatural. Stories of haunting demons, vengeful ghosts, and troublesome bakemono are found everywhere, and while they are usually exaggerated there are also countless ones which are completely true. The standard Rokugani *kawai hanashi* (scary story) told by heimin can often be traced back to real incidents with some minor research, and groups like the Witch-Hunters and the Inquisitors make a point of doing so in order to locate threats to the Empire.

The stories called *Kwaidan*, however, are not mere banal repetitions of peasant superstition. Like the Realm of Void, *Kwaidan* are enigmatic, intangible, and based upon a questionable reality. *Kwaidan* is a word used by samurai in High Rokugani, and translates roughly as "tales of a ghostly nature." In the more common vernacular, the word *Kaiden* is used, which means simply "strange tales." Regardless of which word is used, however, it is very uncommon for these strange, bizarre, weird stories to have

any proven basis in reality. In fact, as the Empire's culture has developed, these stories have evolved into more symbolic and even educational forms, aided in no small part by the Brotherhood of Shinsei. Modern *Kwaidan* often incorporate philosophical discussions and moral tones. Monks and priests use the uncertainty of the stories to relate a Taoist view of the world. The protagonists learn great lessons while dealing with perplexing creatures and events. However, such stories are not solely the province of monks – they are also popular with courtiers, who use *Kwaidan* to bring amusement into the unrelenting sameness of courtly life. Collections of such tales are sold as pillow books, and some lords even send out retainers to gather the most interesting stories into collections known as *monogatari* (see sidebar).

Much of the popularity of *Kwaidan* can be traced a monk named Kaideo, who is credited with gathering the first and greatest collection of *Kwaidan* in the Empire's history. Kaideo's origins are somewhat mysterious; the Crane claim he had once been a Kakita artisan who retired to become a monastic follower of Benteen, while the Lion say he was an Ikoma Omoidasu who became a monk of Tengen. However, both clans agree that Kaideo's epic work is the first and most comprehensive *monogatari* of popular *Kwaidan*. Known as the *Hyakumonogatari Kaidenkai* ("A Gathering of One Hundred Supernatural Tales"), it conveys the essence of each story with clarity and vision so the



enigmas and horrors seem to almost reach off the page. None of this was original work – it was all collected from popular accounts, mostly from among the heimin, and forged into a greater whole.

Kaideo's collection had a lasting effect on the tradition of storytelling, and also left two cultural legacies. The first of these is a courtly game called "The Game of 100 Tales" (detailed in Chapter Six of this book). The second is more esoteric: the power of a few of these intangible stories actually "awakened" into a hitherto undiscovered form of nemuranai known as Kaidanshu. These most unusual mystical "items" are detailed in the Nemuranai section later in this chapter.

Famous and Notable Kwaidan

The tales below are some of the most popular stories collected in the *Hyakumonogatari Kaidenkai*. Most courtiers are familiar with these stories, and recounting them properly is considered a mark of social talent.

AKINOSUKE'S DREAM

Akinosuke is a *goshi*, a farmer-samurai, and the tale of his dream is among the most popular of *Kwaidan*. None agree upon the clan of his birth. Because the story discusses his home as being near the ocean, he is often claimed as a Crane.

Akinosuke lived near the coast far from the prestigious courts. His custom was to walk about his small holding all day before returning home and napping in the garden beneath a lone cedar tree. One warm sunny day, while entertaining friends, Akinosuke grew very tired and suddenly fell asleep. He awoke alone. As he searched about for his guests, he spotted an Imperial procession riding through his land and approached. The Herald, dressed in resplendent silks, proclaimed: "Akinosuke! The Lord of Horai requests most sincerely your august presence at his court!" Having never heard of this foreign lord, Akinosuke knew he must agree and serve as envoy to this new land. When he arrived at the palace of Horai's lord he was astonished to discover that lord wished Akinosuke to wed his only daughter.

Days passed and the ceremonies were held. At their end Akinosuke and his bride were sent out into the lord's island to govern for many years. The island was idyllic, never experiencing famine or drought, without a hint of crime. During these years, Akinosuke's wife bore him seven children, each healthier and more robust than the last.

*Years went by in this place of beauty, but one day, quite suddenly, Akinosuke's wife took ill and died. The former *goshi*'s loss was so profound that he spent his every *koku* to hold a proper funeral. He even erected a monument in her name. Not long after, the lord's herald returned and told Akinosuke he must depart. He would be sent back to the land from whence he came and his children would be cared for in the name of the Great and Resplendent Lord of Horai.*

Monogatari – A LITERARY TRADITION

The *monogatari* is the literary tradition of the Rokugani novel. It is believed to have been created by the followers of Ikoma, and first rose to prominence in the reign of the Shining Prince, Hantei Genji (Hantei II). Monogatari are distinguished not by the contents of the stories but by the style of telling; they are long and ambitious, often epic in nature, meant to depict an extended narrative rather than a single event. In modern Rokugan they form a significant portion of the pillow-book market, though they are not quite so popular as journals or travelogues. They come in two forms, each with their own unique traits.

The first type of *monogatari* most closely resembles what we would consider to be a "novel." It details events over a long span of time, often with all of them related to a single large occurrence like a war or the death of an Emperor. This form may incorporate fantastical elements or may be purely realistic. It may be narrated by a single person or told from multiple viewpoints. It is not unusual for such stories to periodically devolve into highly detailed recounting of styles of dress or fashion, types of armor used, and other historical or aesthetic details. Famous examples of these monogatari include Kakita Ryoku's *Winter* (which recounts a single Winter Court in complete detail) and Ide Tadahito's *Meifumado* (set in the Crab lands).

The second form uses more of an anthology format. It collects a series of stories that all share a common theme, piecing them together into one epic tale. The stories may be closely connected, or they may not relate to each other in any significant way outside of their themes, but regardless they are meant to be told together. This form is more common and popular than a full novel.

Both types of *monogatari* encompass several sub-categories:

- ❶ *Denki Monogatari* depict fantastical events (*Meifumado* and Kaideo's *Hyakumonogatari Kaidenkai* are both examples).
- ❷ *Tsukuri Monogatari* depict court romance (the most famous example is the Tale of Genji, written by the youngest son of Seppun, which features the Shining Prince himself as its protagonist).
- ❸ *Rekishhi Monogatari* recount historical events, such as the formation of the Empire.
- ❹ *Gunki Monogatari* are war tales, typically most popular with the Lion Clan.
- ❺ *Giko Monogatari* are imitation tales, patterned after other works such as plays, shorter stories, and long poems.



As the island kingdom fell away behind him, Akinosuke suddenly awoke. He lay still beneath the cedar tree with his friends chatting all around. Akinosuke rose and recounted his fantastic dream. His closest friend, the Lady Chohime, told Akinosuke he had slept only a few moments, but in that time something strange occurred: a yellow butterfly flew out from Akinosuke's lips and was taken by an ant into a hole beneath the cedar tree. Just as Akinosuke awoke, the butterfly reappeared and flew out into the air.

The Lady Chohime suggested the butterfly might well have been Akinosuke's soul. At her request, Akinosuke dug beneath the tree. Below was a vast kingdom of ants – the kingdom of the Lord in his dreams! Akinosuke searched for his island home and found a separate colony. Within was a small stone resembling a marker for the dead, and underneath was a small urn. Inside was an ant, the kanji for Lady Ariko, “the Little Ant,” scribed upon its form.

KAIDEN BOTAN DORO – THE TALE OF THE PEONY LANTERN

The Tale of the Peony Lantern originated as an oral tradition and was later transformed into both an *otogi boko* (hand puppet show) and a kabuki play, the latter written by Shosuro Encho. The original tale focuses upon the supernatural elements and the Taoist moral lessons on karma. The later adaptations shift the story to focus on the dichotomy between giri (social obligation) and the reality of repressed emotion; love is emphasized as more powerful than death. The tale here is in the original, and focuses upon the mysterious nature of the creature who seduces Shinjo Ogiwara.

On the night of the Bon Festival, Shinjo Ogiwara sat in his home and despaired. He was near the age of retirement and in the last decade he had lost his wife to illness, his children to war, and his estate to famine and taxation. Left with nothing but his honor, Ogiwara contemplated the Sin of Regret and considered seppuku.

Just then, a beautiful geisha and her maid strolled by on their way home. The young servant carried a peony lantern, small and brightly colored, marked with names of the dead. Ogiwara was smitten instantly and called out in great passion. The woman's name was Suyu and she responded to Ogiwara's grief and desire with affection. The Shinjo vowed an eternal love and from then on Suyu and her maid would visit each night at dusk, fleeing with the dawn.

Ogiwara's neighbor noted the strange occurrences and became curious. He spied upon the proceedings late one night, and saw Suyu enter the home for the nightly tryst while the young maid waited seated by the door. As the clouds cleared overhead the moonlight shown down, the neighbor could see both the maid and – through the window – the two lovers. Ogiwara's neighbor was filled with silent shock as Onnotangu's white light revealed both women to be skeletons!

At dawn, the neighbor spoke to Ogiwara and convinced him of his danger. Ogiwara sent for Iuchi priests who warded the outside of his home with ofuda charms and protective wards. When Suyu and her maid returned that evening they were barred from entry. Suyu cried out in lament for her lover, wailing with tears upon her cheeks. Ogiwara resisted for a time, but then he remembered his former grief and the comfort of Suyu and her embrace.

The following morning, the neighbor sought out Ogiwara and discovered the door to the house lay open. Tracks led away to a ruined temple, a peony lantern at its door. Inside, Shinjo Ogiwara lay dead alongside the skeleton of a woman. Dried tears, from anguish or joy we cannot know, lined the widower's face.

KAIDEN MIMI-NASHI-HOICHI – THE TALE OF HOICHI THE EARLESS

One of the best-known Kwaidan, often performed as a puppet-play or a Kabuki play, this tale is usually depicted as happening on the Crane coastlands, although some versions place it in Phoenix territories. In the latter half of the twelfth century, it becomes popular to set the story on the coastline near the ruins of Otosan Uchi. The malignant, almost demonic behavior of the dead spirits is a classic example of a superstitious tale from the common folk, and samurai who recount the story sometimes identify the spirits as *gaki* rather than mere ghosts.

Hoichi was a blind monk and a musician, a glory to hear as he plied the strands of a biwa. Even goblins, demons, and the dead could not refrain from tears when Hoichi played. One hot summer night Hoichi sat upon the stones on the beach near his temple and played soft music for the wind. He waited for his friend, Kaimon the Abbott, and did not expect visitors. Suddenly, above the sound of crashing waves, a deep voice called out his name in the fashion of a samurai summoning his servant: “HOICHI!”

“I do not know who calls. How do you know my name?”

“There is nothing to fear,” the strange voice replied. “I have a message for you. My master is a lord of exceeding rank and privilege and has heard of your skill. He visits these lands in careful disguise and desires to hear you play. You will take up your biwa and come to the estate in which he resides!”

Hoichi did as he was bid, not wishing to anger the samurai. He determined the man was a guard, for he was fully armed and armored. The samurai made him walk fast and his fist was like iron. It was not long before they reached a gate and Hoichi's escort called out. “You within, I have brought Hoichi!” The monk was led through a dizzying maze until he finally heard the buzz of a court.

A woman's voice ordered Hoichi sing the full history of the province, but Hoichi balked for it was long and would take days. He asked instead which part she wished to hear. “The tragic Battle of Red Snow, for its sorrow is most deep.” Of course Hoichi knew the tale and he played. At first he was nervous, but as the court responded with praise, he grew bold. His biwa made the sound of straining oars, the whirl and hissing of arrows, the crash of steel on



helmets and the fury of the fires. As he ended his song, damp with sweat, Hoichi was frightened by the intensity of his emotion.

The woman spoke: "You are amazing! You will be rewarded with riches and wealth, but you must return here every night for this next week. After that time, our lord will return home. Speak to no one of your visit and prepare to return tomorrow." Hoichi was guided back to the temple by the guard and no one noticed his absence – they had thought him asleep in the night. The next night, Hoichi repeated the performance, but this time when he returned, he was discovered by a young monk. "Hoichi, where do you go at such a late hour? We were worried. In your blinded state you should not go out alone."

"I attended private business and could not arrange another hour," Hoichi replied and retired to his rooms. Concerned, the monk told the Abbot, who placed a guard to watch Hoichi the following evening. The monk followed Hoichi, but lost him in the dark and fog. He searched for hours but finally gave up and made his way back down the coast to the temple. Suddenly he was startled to hear the sound of a biwa played furiously. It came from an old tomb which marked the grave of the tragic battle. He saw Hoichi playing, full of vigor and passion, and the spirits of the dead surrounded him like fires from a thousand candles.

"Bewitched!" cried the monk and stopped him from playing.

Hoichi was angry. "You should not interrupt me in the hall of so great a lord!"

The monk laughed out of terror at the absurdity of it all, and told Hoichi of his plight. "You are in the power of the dead, Hoichi."

That night the monks summoned the Abbot and recounted the tale. Hoichi's friend declared, "I will protect you, my friend. I shall cover your body in the holy words of the Tao and pray you will not be harmed. My young aides will cover every inch of your skin while I go right now to implore the Fortunes on your behalf!"

Hoichi was bade to sit in his normal spot, biwa by his side. He was stripped nude and the younger monks covered him from head to toe in mystical kanji. "Sit still and do not answer. If you make a noise or stir, you will be torn asunder by their wrath. They cannot harm you if you ignore them. They will not see you in the night."

The guard arrived as expected and spent long minutes calling out Hoichi's name. "Hoichi!" he said, not once, but thrice, and in a savage tone. "No answer? What to do?" The guard approached Hoichi's spot, but silence still reigned.

"Here is the biwa but of the player I see... only two ears! That explains it. He had no mouth with which to answer me – nothing left but ears. I will return with these to my lord as proof I have obeyed." With that, Hoichi's ears were gripped by fingers of iron and ripped from his skull. Hoichi made no sound and did not cry out, not even as he passed out bloody on the ground.

The Abbot returned from his prayers and cried out in horror. Hoichi lay dizzy and helpless, clammy from the loss of blood. "Poor Hoichi! My fault! Everywhere were writ the protective wards, but not upon your ears! I trusted my acolytes and it is my fault not to have done it myself! I will heal you, but be cheerful – for you will never again be visited by these terrible spirits!"

Hoichi's story spread far and wide and made him famous. Many came to hear him recite the famous tale of his adventure and he received gifts of patronage and money. To this day, the lament of the spirits by the sea can be heard, longing for his music.

KISS OF THE KUCHISAKE-ONNA

This story, set in the infamous licensed district of Ryoko Owari, is of uncertain origin and the nature of the monster within it is a mystery. The ronin shugenja Seikansha, who collected stories about the Shadowlands from across the Empire, found an account by a Crab officer during that clan's brief occupation of the City of Lies which involved a demon called a *dokufu* ("mountain spider") hunting his men; it is possible this Kwaidan originated as a commoner's attempt to share that story.





Yasuki Taro sat drinking alone in the floating world of Teardrop Island within Ryoko Owari, the City of Green Walls. Young Taro was flush with drink celebrating a victory that would secure trading rights for his clan. He spied a beautiful samurai-ko of the Bayushi, or perhaps Shosuro, sitting across the entertainment house, a tight mask covering her lower face. She was elegant, with eyes that drank the soul, her hair a silken waterfall.

Taro was not usually a brave man when it came to romance, but with sake-fueled steps he crossed the crowded room to sit by his quarry. She smiled and cooed and Taro bought her many drinks, though not one did she touch, and she rested her lithe fingers upon his arm. Taro quivered and suggested quite boldly that they depart from this packed hall. With a wink the Scorpion lady followed.

Taro could not restrain his passions long enough to return to the city proper and paid the boatman well to leave the two alone in a tiny skiff. "Am I beautiful?" whispered his Scorpion prize in a quivering voice. "Beyond imagining!" replied Taro as he clumsily tried for a kiss. The dark waters below reflected a clouded sky and mirrored Taro's fumbling upon their surface.

But success eluded Taro; the lady turned away and whispered softly to the night sky once more: "Am I beautiful?" Taro realized he must woo her. He mustered his intellectual prowess to compose a haiku to regale the Scorpion, whose name he did not yet know, with sweet praise. "You are most beautiful," Taro said and reached to undo her mask.

The mask slipped from her face even as the clouds drifted away, and she was exposed in the moonlight. Taro froze, fear seized his heart, and he could not scream as the Scorpion's mouth split from ear-to-ear. Beneath her nose were two flaps of skin spread wide. Displayed within were row upon row of razor sharp teeth. Her jaw unhinged like a great snake and somehow she whispered again: "Am I beautiful?"

OKIKU AND THE NINE PLATES

Taoist monks often present this story as a homily on the sin of Desire and the importance of samurai showing compassion and respect for those lower in the Celestial Order. The most common version of the tale is set in Dragon lands, but other versions use the Lion, Crab, or even the Crane lands as their backdrop.

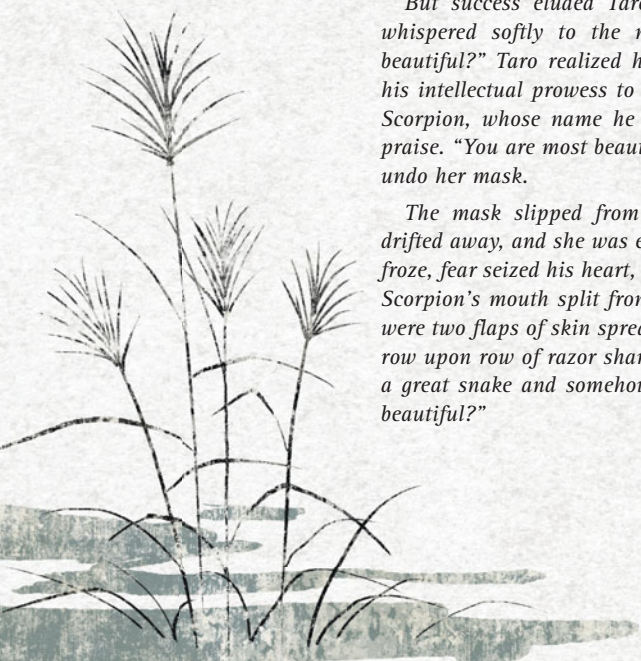
In the remote mountains of the Mirumoto there lived a lord named Aoyama. Aoyama was a proud man who boasted many victories in battle and duels within the court. He was called "the Victorious" for not once had he lost in test of skill or upon the bloody field. But Aoyama was a proud man and in his dotage he became greedy, selfish, and quite lecherous. He hid these sins from his lord, or so he thought, and was gifted by the Dragon Champion with two rare gifts: a servant of unprecedented beauty to run his household, and ten golden plates embossed with his family name.

Okiku was the servant's name and as the weeks and months passed by word spread far and wide that Aoyama had in his possession a woman pure of heart, pure of soul, said to be as beautiful as Lady Doji herself. Aoyama could not resist for long the tugging of his impure heart. He flirted with his servant, at first subtly, but it did not take long for his behavior to shatter the bounds of propriety. Okiku refused her lord's behavior at every turn, yet she continued to run his household with acumen and devotion to duty.

Aoyama could not stand to be turned away and conspired one evening to trick Okiku in a most devious fashion. He hid one of the ten golden plates, which she polished every night, and let Okiku believe that she had carelessly lost the gift. Normally, such a crime would be punishable by death for one of heimin birth and Okiku quickly became frantic in her search. She counted one to nine, cleaning again and again, crying out at every failed attempt to reach ten. No matter how hard she tried the plate would not return. In the end Okiku gave in, too honorable to lie, and confessed the lost plate to her lord.

Aoyama offered to overlook the matter if Okiku would be his lover. But even then she would not, could not, give in to his demand, and Aoyama's unbridled fury was a terror to behold. He had his guards beat the servant until she could not even crawl, and then personally threw her limp body down an unused well.

That very night Aoyama awoke to the sound of a terrible scream, full of anguish and vengeance. He ran to his room of treasures to discover the spirit of Okiku kneeling upon the floor, cleaning each golden plate again and again, counting one to nine and screeching at the number ten. In this way did pass days, then weeks, and Aoyama could not rest. His hair turned white, his eyes sagged with lack of sleep, and his ears became bloody and scabbed from scratching to hold out the screams. His household fell into disarray and his shameful state became obvious even to his distant champion.



Lord Togashi sent to Aoyama a monk of the ise zumi order, a man skilled at the removal of evil spirits. However, the ise zumi said that in order for the spirit to leave, Aoyama must repent. The once-proud Mirumoto lord fell to his knees and confessed his sins, his crimes of fury and passion, and lost all his face and honor. The tattooed man looked on without judgment. That night, as Okiku's count neared the end, he shouted at the top of his lungs: "TEN!" Okiku heard the word as if from her own voice, and she vanished, relieved someone had finally found the missing plate. Aoyama was sent away in disgrace and never seen again.

SECRETS OF THE DEAD

It seemed a rich Mantis lord had sent his daughter, Sonoko, to the capital to learn the ways of the Emperor's Court from skilled teachers. She lived there for four happy years before returning home to be married. She died not long after giving birth to her first and only son.

In his fifth year, the boy discovered the spirit of Sonoko in the room her husband had left as a shrine. Her small effects were placed before the mirror she brought back with her from the Emperor's city. Sonoko returned each night, a shadow of her former self, and stared into the mirror. "A woman is fond her small things," they said of her. Little was done to stop the spirit until her boy began to take on unusual quirks in his talks with the spirit. The Mantis summoned a priest, a monk of Kaimetsu-Uo named Daigen.

Daigen beseeched the spirit and prayed each night, performing rites and meditating upon the sutras. He implored both his patron Fortune and the kami, and still Sonoko would not go. "There must be a reason she comes here, something among her things she wishes to be removed," said Daigen, and he searched. He emptied each drawer, looked behind the mirror, tore apart the wood, and finally discovered beneath the rice paper lining of a bottom drawer a letter written long ago. Daigen read the letter and destroyed it. The next morning he told the Mantis that Sonoko would never return again.

Kaideo records that in most versions of this tale, the all-important letter is a token of love from Sonoko's time in Otosan Uchi, and in these versions the story is a simple one of Regret and lingering spirits. However, one alteration interested Kaideo enough to include it separately in his great collection. The tale ended the same way, with the destruction of the letter, but then Daigen discovered that the spirit was not that of Sonoko herself. The letter contained the lingering passion of an intense affair (and proof that Sonoko's child was the product of adultery) and this intense emotion had awakened into a spirit. However, it was trapped inside the drawer and deviously tricked the monk into believing the paper must be destroyed. As the letter burned in a fire, the awakened twisted spirit fled the room. Some variants say it possessed the heart of Sonoko's boy, or her distant lover, or her father, or the monk. Regardless, the awakened spirit of Sonoko's ancient passion haunts Rokugan to this day.





SHOKUJINKI – THE HUMAN-EATING GHOST

A classic supernatural story with a strange and bizarre threat, this tale is sometimes considered to have originated in legends of Gaki. However, experts from the Kuni and Toritaka dismiss it as pure superstition. It has several different endings, depending on how tragic or frightening the tale-teller is trying to be.

There lived an ascetic monk named Kokushi who travelled in poverty and slept among the elements. One night he discovered an anjitsu (a small hut for hermetic monks) in ruinous condition. He tapped upon the door and called out for aid, for food, and to share the hut for a night's rest. From within Kokushi could hear the distant voice of a Brother deny him flat out. "There is a village and it is not far. Go there!"

Kokushi was confused but did as he was bid, and it was not long before he arrived at a town of just a dozen huts. At the headman's home he was met by a single servant, offered the nearly empty central room, and supplied with food. He passed out quickly in the darkness, tired from his trek. Kokushi slept through the day, but was awakened in the hour before sundown by a young man's sobbing voice.

"Revered sir, I am now the head of my house and must tell you of my grief. Just last night, as you arrived, my father died in his sleep. We did not wish to disturb you for the proper rites, but sundown is at hand and we must now depart." Kokushi was confused and upset that he had not been called upon for the funeral rites. The new headman told Kokushi it was the custom of their village after a death had taken place to abandon the town for an evening.

"The village is haunted, you see, and you must come away with us tonight."

Kokushi would not have it. He vowed to stay with the body through the night and perform the proper rites. The young man was alarmed at Kokushi's choice. "We bid you farewell. If you see anything strange, please ward yourself well. We will not think less of you if you flee in the night."

Kokushi dismissed the words as superstition and recited the proper rites. He meditated in the room with the body in the dark. At midnight, when the silence of night was at its fullest, Kokushi saw a vast and noiseless Shape. Kokushi found he could not move and could not speak. He watched as the Shape lifted the corpse and devoured it whole, eating first the head, then the body, every bone, sinew, and hair, and drinking up all the blood. Finished, the monstrous thing turned to the funerary offerings and devoured them too. Then it fled, as mysteriously as it came.

The villagers returned in the morning and were surprised to see Kokushi. When he told his tale, they said it was because of the creature that they fled. "Death summons it. Any time we did not leave, someone else dies in the night. You are fortunate it did not consume you."

"I am protected by my piety. If I may ask, why have you not asked the monk upon the hill to aid you in this matter?" Kokushi asked. But of the monk the villagers were ignorant. "There is no such person," they said, "and no one has lived in that anjitsu in generations."

Curious, Kokushi ventured back to the ruined hut and demanded entry. As soon as he entered he saw a fellow monk, a man aged beyond recognition, who fell prostrate to the ground. He cried out: "I am ashamed, dear brother! I am ashamed!"

"Why? You directed me to shelter and you aided me in my need."

"I can give no man shelter, my brother. For I am cursed." With that, the old man shifted and became the horrible beast Kokushi had seen the night before, but then shifted back and offered his tale.

"My name is Muso and I am cursed. Once, I was priest of this region, performing the holy rites. But there was no other Brother to hold me to task and I fell into greed. I pressed the common folk for payment. I demanded food and luxuries to perform the tasks that should be free. I partook of the pleasures of this world at the expense of others. When I died, I was immediately reborn. I have become Shokujinki, Eater of the Dead, and I must devour those who die as I devoured in my life the livelihood of the living. Please, oh pious brother, I entreat you to aid me!"

Kokushi understood at once. He sat up with Muso that night and implored the Fortunes to intercede on his behalf.

In some versions of this story, Kokushi and Muso do battle and the Shokujinki is physically destroyed. In others, the two pray and meditate,





and in the morning the spirit of Muso moves on to Meido. In the most horrible versions, the Shokujinki overpowers Kokushi and joins with his soul – when the villagers come the following day, they find only the prayer beads of both monks.

In all versions of the tale, the Shokujinki is never seen again... but could still be wandering Rokugan to this very day.

SPIRITUAL DIPLOMACY

The common folk of Rokugan have numerous legends about vengeful ghosts returning to re-animate their bodies, and this Kwaidan probably originated from such superstitions. No proper samurai believes a dying man can animate his body to perform the last thing he wanted to do, but the tale does have a certain resonance among those who know of the power of goryo (vengeful ghosts).

In his youth, yoriki Seppun Heian witnessed the execution of a ronin bandit of terrible renown. The bandit lord wreaked much havoc across the province, pillaging and burning, torturing and murdering, and at his death proclaimed with ferocious passion that he would seek vengeance upon his executioner. His words gave everyone pause, but Heian's master, the magistrate of the region, fulfilled his role and removed the bandit's head. Twin spurts of blood shot forth from the body into the magistrate's eyes and he fell back, tripped upon a stone, and broke his neck.

Years passed and Heian became a magistrate in his own right. Once more he was to oversee an execution, but this time it would be Heian who completed the deed.

The execution was to take place at dawn in the central gardens before the castle. The man to be slain was once a servant of the same evil bandit lord, and had since come into infamy of his own. Recognizing the former yoriki, the bandit sought to terrify Heian with a reminder of his master's fate.

The criminal was made to kneel, bags of rice packed tight about his form, his hands tied behind his back. Heian was no fool and made certain the body could not fall nor could an unwelcome spray of blood make him trip. The bandit cried out that his actions were the fault of his karma, not his own will for evil. "If you kill me just for this I will repay you as my former master repaid yours! I shall be avenged in blood!"

Everyone remembered the tale, and even the daimyo balked and was about to relent, but Heian held up his hand and spoke clearly. "You may intimidate us as you please once you are dead. Yet it is difficult for me to believe what you say. Will you give us some sign of your resentment once I remove your head?"

"I WILL!" said the criminal with vehement wrath, hoping Seppun Heian would back down.

But the Seppun remained still and calm. He drew his katana and said, "Very well. I will cut off your head. In front of you is a stepping stone. Once your head rolls to the ground, prove your wrath and bite that stone. If your angry ghost can do that, most assuredly will I be afraid. Will you succeed at biting that stone?"

"I WILL BITE IT, YOU FOOL! I WILL! If you kill me, you will know my vengeance and I will prove it by biting that stone. You should not kill me!"

Heian spoke coolly. "I cannot believe you unless you bite that stone. Will you bite it?"

"I WILL! I WILL BITE THE STONE!" said the criminal with all his passion, and Heian swung his blade with a flash. Two jets of blood spurted up, but Heian was out of the way, and the shorn head fell upon the sand. The angry face gnawed and bit and chomped upon the stone and held it like a vice.

"What have you done?" cried Heian's lord. "He will kill us all in vengeance!"

"Fear not, my lord." Heian looked unconcerned and held out his sword to be cleaned. An attendant cleansed the blade with water from a pure spring and wiped the blade with soft paper. The ritual performed, Heian bowed to his lord. "All is safe for, you see, it is known that with their dying breath the dead can return to the living. Yes, this man's anger was so great that I knew he spoke true and would return."

"Then why did you kill him? You, at least, are doomed."

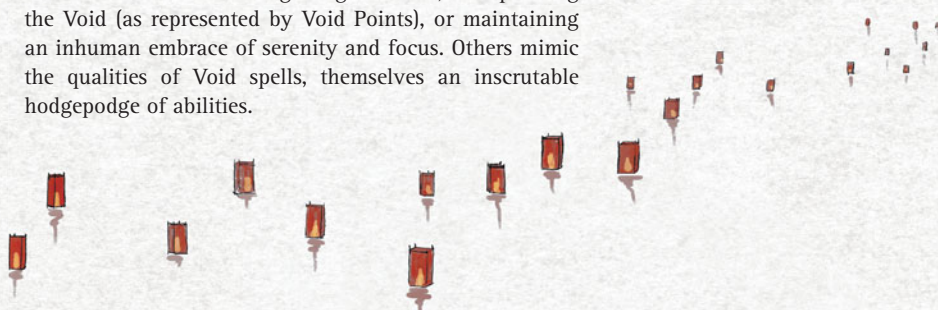
"I am not, my lord." Heian directed the head and stone be placed inside a wooden box and once it was removed, he continued. "You see, only the last intention of the spirit is dangerous. He vowed to kill me. He vowed to haunt us. He vowed your death and mine... but I diverted his passion with my query. His desire shifted from revenge to biting that stone and he died with only one purpose in mind. He has achieved it and will forever gnaw upon your garden stone, but no other vengeance will he seek."

All the court stood in awe and it was true, for no other vengeance was ever sought.

Nemuranai of Void

The awakened items of Void defy any common themes except perhaps that each is enigmatic and peculiar, stranger than nemuranai of other Elements. It should be remembered that the Void does not have kami and thus items associated with Void do not behave in any sort of predictable way as others would. Nemuranai of Void follow their own rules, difficult to understand, and their nature is often a mystery to be solved.

Objects imbued with Void are capable of mimicking the other kami and developing new powers over time. They are attuned to humanity and resist use by creatures not touched by the divine spark of man. Void nemuranai sometimes assist in seeking enlightenment, manipulating the Void (as represented by Void Points), or maintaining an inhuman embrace of serenity and focus. Others mimic the qualities of Void spells, themselves an inscrutable hodgepodge of abilities.





The phrase “common minor nemuranai” does not apply here. Void creations are never obvious in their use and show little in the way of predictable pattern. A Void weapon is as likely to be a jitte as it is to be a katana. One shared trait of both protective and offensive items of Void is the ability to violate the powers of the other Elements. Void weapons might slice easily through Earth-infused armor, or a Void-infused obi might simply unravel a Fire spell as it washes over the target. Void nemuranai frustrate any attempt at common understanding.

BRILLIANT ORNAMENTS OF THE MOON

Asahina Akusesari was born at the end of the fourth century, the child of the Asahina daimyo and the Elemental Master of Void. Divinations at her birth prophesied she would surpass her father's ability to touch the Void, and her childhood was spent training with shugenja of both clans. Akusesari was gifted with the talent for crafting the tsangusuri the Crane are famous for, and high hopes surrounded her, but she never reached the full realization of her power. The night before her gempukku, she was kidnapped by members of a moon cult and sacrificed in a dark maho ritual. Days passed before magistrates discovered the cult's hideout and destroyed them, far too late to save the girl. They did, however, discover several strange tiny ornaments around her body.

The items appeared to be fashioned out of pure crystal. Examination revealed them to be physical materializations of the girl's tears, somehow made manifest in her final hours. Even in death, Akusesari's natural talent enabled her to reach out and grasp the Void for one final creation.

These minor nemuranai are small crystal teardrops with an inborn glow resembling the light of the moon. Each ornament functions one time for its owner, then falls inert until gifted or taken by another. Each ornament offers a single magical boon that will allow the user to succeed at one difficult or impossible task. For example, one Ornament is famed for granting a samurai the ability to walk upon water for a few minutes, allowing him to save his drowning child.



Another ornament is rumored to have drawn the eye of a suitor for a Doji maiden, thus beginning the long courtship that would lead to her marriage. These effects are always unique and cannot be predicted beforehand – in game terms, they are the purview of the GM.

THE CANDLE OF THE VOID

The creation of the items known as Candles of the Void is a part of the curriculum for initiates of the Isawa Shugenja School. Consequently, they are among the most common awakened items in existence. Sensei teach their students how to use these items to attune themselves to the Void... and therefore to all Elements at once. Each Candle of the Void is imbued with faint elemental magic, retaining the touch of the Void within its center. Outwardly each appears to hold only Fire, but in fact each incorporates a fragment of each Element. The candles are thick, usually made of solid black wax about a foot in length. They burn normally, but do not melt until their gift is activated. The Isawa consider these candles to be staple tools for both spell research and for bolstering spells when necessary. Some Isawa also have a custom of saving the first candle they created as an offering to their own students.

When a shugenja casts a spell within a short distance of a burning Candle of the Void, the candle instantly melts by several inches, the molten wax forming an inexpressible pattern at its base. These forms are believed to represent the ineffable nature of the Void, being both entrancing (never ugly or menacing) and yet impossible to truly understand. Some Isawa have noted that the patterns are more beautiful and complex when coming from Candles crafted by those of greater skill and experience, suggesting that more powerful shugenja are better able to connect to the nature of the Void.

A Candle of the Void will burn indefinitely until it is used, and has five effective uses before its wax is all melted away. A lit Candle grants any normal Elemental spell cast within 10' a Free Raise. Void Candles crafted by more powerful shugenja are said to afford greater benefits (at the discretion of the GM). In addition, any shugenja who meditates within 10' of a lit Candle of the Void gains a +1k1 bonus on the Meditation Skill Roll (this also counts as a usage of the Candle's power).

THE DRAGON HELMS

“Is any man wise enough to command a dragon?”
– Naka Kuro, Grandmaster of the Elements

The Dragon Helms are legendary devices created by a clever and devious shugenja-ko of the Soshi family, a woman whose name is lost to history. This Scorpion discovered a way to tap into the purity of the Elemental Dragons and capture a small portion of their essence within a physical object. She was destroyed by the Oracle of Fire for her audacity, but apprentices carried on the work until one Helm was crafted for each of the six known Dragons – Earth, Air, Fire, Water, Void, and Thunder. (It is rumored that a seventh Helm was later created for the Celestial Dragon itself, the so-called “Dragon Helm of the

Heavens.”) Many consider these Helms to be blasphemous, but others argue the Dragons themselves would destroy the items if their existence were truly an offense against the Heavens.

The Dragon Helms allow the wearers to perceive the true form of any Elemental Dragon, their Oracles, or other divine servants such as the Ryu. The owner of a Dragon Helm may also issue one command to the Dragon associated with it. The Dragon will obey... but the wearer must then give the Helm to the Dragon. Abuses of power are punished severely, since there is nothing to prevent the Dragon from harming the user afterward.

The Dragon Helms share a general appearance as ornate helms with elaborate decorations in a draconic theme. The colors and specific shapes match the particular Dragon associated with that Helm – for example, the Dragon Helm of Thunder has a silvery color and is etched in patterns of lightning, while the Dragon Helm of Void is made from an inky black metal which obscures the eyes in deep darkness.

Aside from the general ability to issue a single command to a Dragon, each of the Helms is said to have its own unique properties based on the particular Dragon matched to it:

- ⑤ The Helm of Air enhances the wearer's speed and dexterity, granting a +1k1 bonus to all rolls involving Reflexes.
- ⑤ The Helm of Earth strengthens the wearer's toughness and resilience, granting Reduction 3 and awarding a +1k1 bonus to all rolls involving Stamina.
- ⑤ The Helm of Fire enhances the wearer's memory and intellect, granting +1k1 to all rolls involving Intelligence.
- ⑤ The Helm of Water grants enhanced strength and clarity of vision, represented by +1k1 bonuses to all non-damage Strength rolls and all rolls involving Perception.
- ⑤ The Helm of Void grants the wearer an additional (bonus) Void Point each day.
- ⑤ The Helm of Thunder gives the wearer the strength of heroism, awarding +3k3 to all rolls to resist Fear effects.
- ⑤ The Helm of the Heavens, if it exists, awards a general blessing of the Heavens on all of the wearer's endeavors, represented by a +2k0 bonus to all Skill rolls.

DRAGON PUZZLE BOXES

Created not long after the discovery of Kaidanshu, these devices are often considered to be modest physical representations of Enlightenment itself. They are small and intricately confounding works of engineering, originally popular only within the Dragon Clan. It is said the first Puzzle Box was created by an Agasha shugenja as a gift to a friend in the Togashi Tattooed Order. Later, they became popular as gifts to other samurai in the clan and throughout the Empire at large. Each box is a unique and frustrating puzzle, designed to help others perceive

the world in a new light and thereby start on the road to Enlightenment. They are small mechanical items, seemingly lacking any overt magical properties, and are usually crafted from wood (or more rarely, metal). When solved and opened, a puzzle box typically reveals a koan or some other small item with little to no material value. No box is solved easily, and they are so devious as to enrage those who try to open them. Even the simplest of boxes require many hours of concentration to understand and solve, and it is said some of them have never been successfully opened.

Solving a Dragon Puzzle Box requires a Skill roll with Investigation (or perhaps a suitable Lore Skill if the GM prefers), at a TN ranging from 25 to 60 depending on the specific box's complexity and power. Solving a Puzzle Box grants a temporary sense of peace and enlightenment, which may be represented by awarding 1 to 3 Free Raises (depending on the strength of the box) that may be used on Skill Rolls for the remainder of that day. More powerful boxes may also grant other rewards (such as temporary Void Points) at the discretion of the GM.

There are a few instances of Puzzle Boxes created by “mad monks” and other malignant persons and forces, such as the Kokujin “family” or the Order of the Spider. Such twisted Puzzle Boxes do not grant Enlightenment but rather madness and evil, which the GM may opt to represent with Disadvantages such as Curse of the Moon or Enlightened Madness.

EGG OF THE VOID

The Egg of the Void is a legendary nemuranai containing within its small form a power exceeding even the Clan Ancestral Swords. Supposedly, the Egg was a gift from the Elemental Dragons to the original Kami when they fell from Tengoku. It acts as a conduit between the mortal realm and the Celestial Heavens, vibrating with an echo of the power of the Elemental Dragons. Traditionally the small egg sits between the Masters of Fire and of Void in the chamber of the Five Elemental Masters. At some point in the Empire's early history the Egg was lost, vanishing from all accounts; it was finally found again in the mid-





twelfth century, retrieved from the Tomb of the Seven Thunders. There is only one recorded instance of the Egg actually being used: the summoning of the Dragon of Fire when the Phoenix Clan occupied Toshi Ranbo at the end of the Winter of Red Snow.

Touching the Egg connects the user to the mind of a single Elemental Dragon. The conversation can last as long as the Dragon's attention does not waver, but only one question may be asked; the Dragon will whisper a true response in the cryptic fashion of its kind. In some instances, the Dragon may also offer other forms of assistance, up to and including direct intervention in mortal affairs – although such will only occur in the rarest of instances.

Once a mortal ends a conversation with a Celestial Dragon, there is a debilitating backlash brought on by the stress of having touched the infinite. The mortal must roll Void at TN 40 or fall into a catatonic state for a number of hours equal to the difference between the failed roll and the TN.

The Isawa Masters have theorized a possible “final power” of the Egg which could be used in a situation of extreme need. They believe that if the Egg is thrown to the ground with this intention in mind, it will explode in a violent conflagration of Void and Elemental fury. The power consumes the user, twisting and annihilating body and soul, but also destroys everything else within a half-mile of that point. Individuals caught within the blast may be simply annihilated, or they may be shifted backwards or forwards in time by up to eight hours.

LUCKY CRICKETS

Lucky crickets are carried in miniature cages by samurai and commoners all across Rokugan, but most of them are perfectly ordinary things, offering nothing more than emotional reassurance. Every so often, however, such a cricket may be touched by the unknowable nature of the Void. This happens spontaneously and often for no apparent reason; there is no known instance of a shugenja creating one of these little nemuranai deliberately. Additionally, a lucky cricket never offers its power unless it is bestowed to another as a gift.

A lucky cricket grants one specific benefit: a single bonus Void Point that can only be used once. Use of this Void Point is limited by the type of cage within which the cricket is bound. For example, a cricket bound within a tiny silver cask (a coffin) created a Void Point that can only be spent to reduce damage, while a cricket hung by a cord from the saya of a katana can only use its Void Point to increase damage with that blade. The most famous example of a lucky cricket is one in a simple cage which grants a Void Point for use with a School Technique, Kiho, or spell.

THE MEMPO OF VOID

“We give our lives that this final task might be completed. Our spirits join with the Void contained within it, giving it form. It is a good death.”

– Asako Shingon and Iuchi Higoshia

The Mempo of Void one of the five Elemental treasures created by Asako Shingon of the Phoenix and Iuchi Higoshia of the Unicorn in order to maintain the Celestial Balance after the Dark Oracles let loose the Elemental Terrors upon Rokugan. The Mempo was the last of the five to be created and required the shugenja to sacrifice their lives to complete it. This was because the soul of man served as the perfect representation of the commingling of all Elements balanced by the Void.

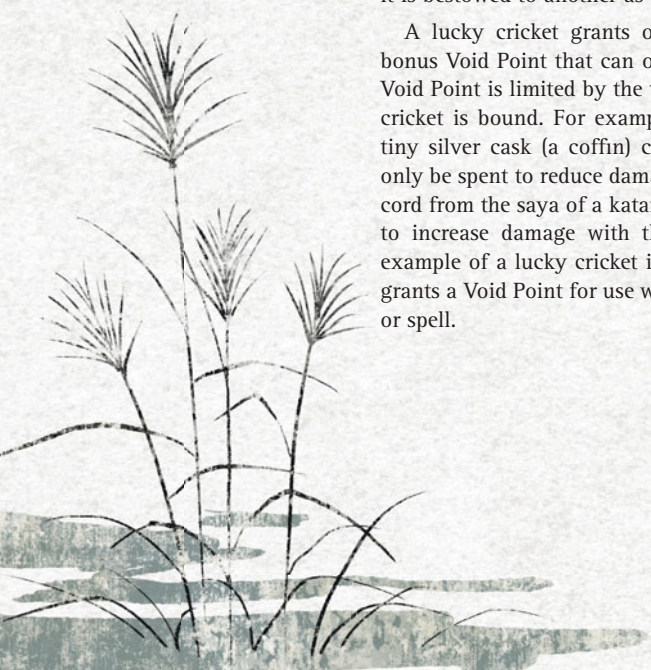
The Mempo was lost during the War of the Spirits after its only known user, the Lion Champion Kitsu Motso, fell in battle. Rumor of its whereabouts surfaced periodically after that, but none were confirmed, and the item's very physical nature is difficult to pin down.

Those who claim to have seen the Mempo of Void describe it as being made of a syrupy, viscous substance, constantly shifting its form. The item covers the face of its wearer completely in the midnight darkness of a moonless night. Moreover, when it is worn several strands of the weird material wisp upon an unseen breeze, causing the samurai to be remembered as showing an eerie and fearsome visage.

The Mempo of Void awakens its wearers to a new form of perception, allowing them to recognize the subtle shifts and connections between all Elements. This new perception extends numerous benefits, limited only by the bearer's personal connection with the realm of Void. While wearing the Mempo, a samurai can see all invisible objects and beings and is immune to any mind-affecting or controlling spell or ability. The wearer is also able to discern those who are under the effects of spells as well as those who are favored by the kami (e.g. characters who possess the Chosen by the Oracles or Friendly Kami Advantage, for example). Finally, the Mempo's tie to the realm of Void prevents any loss of Void Points for any reason other than voluntary spending them, and also grants the wearer an extra Void Point each day.

NOROU KUBI BUKURO (THE ACCURSED HEAD BAG)

This item is believed to have been created by a shugenja-ko who travelled into the Shadowlands to speak to the then-newfound Dark Oracle of the Void. She begged a question of the Oracle: “How can I keep my enemy from ever harming me or mine again?” The Oracle answered by placing the plan for this item, the Accursed Head Bag, into her mind. The shugenja's enemies were abundant, so she fashioned multiple copies, each one slowly stealing a portion of her own soul. In the end she sacrificed her own reincarnation in order to deny her enemies the same.





The bag is used, like all mundane items of its type, for preserving the removed head of a downed enemy; the only sign of its sinister nature is a tiny web-work of black lace inside the bag. The powers of this item are simple but blasphemous: any head placed inside a *norou kubi bukuro* has its attendant soul also trapped within. The spirit is denied reincarnation and cannot even leave *Ningen-do* to journey into the afterlife. The bag preserves the head (and the soul) intact so long as its drawstrings are kept closed... and it is said anyone who picks it up can hear the hoarse screams of the bound soul within. However, if the bag is opened, the trapped soul will immediately escape, and the head will begin to decay normally.

OFUDA OF THE UNRAVELED SOUL

These blank spell scrolls were created as gifts by an *Ishiken* who succumbed to madness (some stories claim he was influenced by the power of the Lying Darkness). Each is a simple collection of wooden slats held together by soft twine. When unrolled they form a dangerous connection to the realm of Void and emanate a power which can be felt by anyone with even the barest hint of mystical prowess. The *ofuda* is blank when found, allowing any spell to be inscribed on it. If the owner dies or loses the *ofuda*, it becomes blank again, ready for use once more.

Any spell inscribed upon a Scroll of the Unraveled Soul immediately becomes connected to the harried fringe of the Void Dragon's domain. This does have benefits – the wooden scrolls grant a Free Raise when casting a spell inscribed upon them. However, any time the caster uses this Free Raise or spends a Void Point when casting the spell, the maddening power of the *ofuda* is released, producing a random effect that is both beneficial and dangerous at the same time. The GM may choose an effect, or simply roll randomly on the following list:

- ④ 1-2: The caster suffers immediate Wounds equal to half the amount by which he exceeded the spell casting TN and regains the spell slot used.
- ④ 3-4: The spell gains an additional two Free Raises. The next time one of the caster's harmful spells fails, it instead succeeds... but affects the caster.
- ④ 5-6: The caster's mind warps with visions of the Void. He gains the use of an Inner Gift for one day, but suffers the effects of *Momoku* for that same time.
- ④ 7-9: All dice rolled to determine the results of the spell (damage, healing, etc) explode once no matter the number rolled. However, the caster suffers a Fear effect with a rank equal to the same number of dice.
- ④ 9-10: Regain any Void Point spent on this spell-casting roll, but the *ofuda* becomes blank and must be re-inscribed with a spell before it can be used again. At the GM's option, this result may also draw the attention of the Lying Darkness (perhaps a point or Rank of Shadow, depending on how the GM uses the Darkness in the game).

REBIRTH OF THE PHOENIX

These *nemuranai* are most commonly believed to have been crafted by *Isawa Ujikki*, an Elemental Master of the first century who is credited with creating the rules for *taryu-jiai* dueling. History is obscure on *Ujikki*'s exact nature and origins, but Phoenix loremasters believe him to have been one of *Isawa*'s siblings and the first Master of Void. However, there is some disagreement as to whether *Ujikki* truly created these items, and some Phoenix historians claim they are the actual eggs of the phoenix for which the clan is named. Whatever the truth may be, the egg-like objects called the Rebirth of the Phoenix have existed since the first century, usually under the Phoenix Clan's control.

Each of these items appears to be an egg the size of a baby's fist, perfectly smooth and colored a liquid black which looks as though it could rub off on one's skin. Those staring too long at the shells claim to see the stars "from the other side of the night sky."

Each egg grants a unique and powerful gift, but only once before it vanishes, only to reappear elsewhere in the Empire. Anyone who possesses an Egg of Rebirth gains an effect similar to the Great Destiny Advantage – if they are slain, the egg cracks open with the pure light of a thousand stars, and both it and the linked individual are consumed in *kharmic* fire. The slain person emerges from the flames unscathed and whole, untouched by impurity and pain, eyes glittering with the remnants of the furious inferno; the egg disappears. It is believed (though not definitively confirmed) that a person purified by this item is purged of all curses and diseases, cleansed of the Shadowlands Taint and the touch of the Lying Darkness, and cured of madness and impious desire.

The *Isawa* consider these items to be the rightful legacy of their family, and any rumor of their discovery outside of the Phoenix Clan will draw their attention like lightning to a rod.





SHARING RINGS

Legend credits a Scorpion named Jiro as the creator of these twin rings, though it is just as likely that the real artisan died generations earlier and Jiro was merely the first to explore their unique nature. Each ring is made from what appears to be smooth obsidian, flecked with tiny snowflakes of crystal. The outer band is etched with kanji no mortal can read, while the inner circumference has a spiral pattern dizzying to the eye. The rings are permanently bound in spirit but fated to remain physically apart.

The Sharing Rings only reveal their power when each is worn by a different individual. The strange devices weave the karmic resonance of each soul together and create an inseparable new spirit, causing the wearer of each ring to become bound to the other until death. If a ring is cast aside, buried, or even destroyed, the owner will find it back upon his finger the following day.

The devices allow for an unsettling shared quality. If one ring is placed to the ear, the user hears what his counterpart would hear. If placed to the eye, sight is shared in the same fashion. If placed within the palm, the user begins to mimic the physical movement of the other person. In this way the persons grow closer each day until they begin to share each other's dreams, both sleeping and awake... eventually driving each other mad.

Mechanically, the Sharing Rings create an unbreakable Karmic Tie (1 point) between the two bearers. If one or both of the users wishes to spend Experience Points to enhance the Karmic Tie, further powers are attained as the interwoven souls bind tighter. In addition to the general linkage effects described above, the following additional effects occur:

When the Tie is at 2 points, that user is able to perceive the basic physical state of the other (Wounds, injuries, poison, general health, and so forth).

At 3 points, the user becomes aware of the natural abilities the other possesses (e.g. their Rings and Traits).

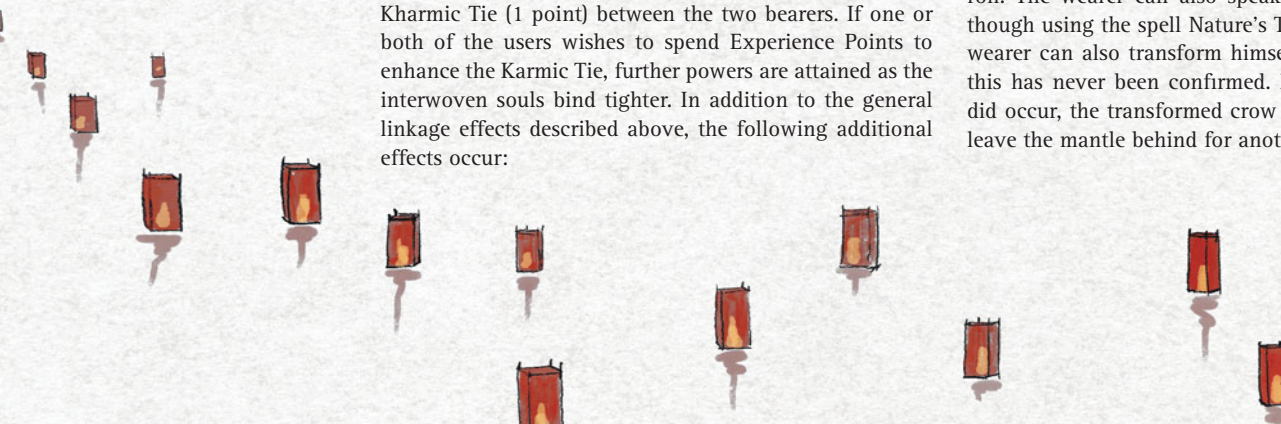
At 4 points, the user may function as if he has Rank 1 in any Skill that the counterpart has at a Rank 5 or higher.

If both users reach 5 points, the bound souls become one and are able to share each other's Void Points. It is said at this point that the death of one causes such a terrible shock that the other will immediately die as well.

THE ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTEEN FEATHERS

When the monk Ichirai heard the tale of Emma-O and his journey to Enlightenment (see the L5R 4th Edition supplement *The Book of Air*, pages 134-136), he was instantly inspired to undertake his own journey. Ichirai knew Emma-O had journeyed through one hundred and eighteen incarnations before meeting the Kenku and ascending to become the Fortune of Death. Since the monk did not know the age of his own soul, he chose to seek out a Kenku master to discover that knowledge. The tales of Ichirai's quest say that each time the monk discovered a Kenku teacher it transformed into a crow and fled. Upon each departure, a single feather was left behind; once Ichirai had collected 118 of these Kenku feathers, he pieced them together into a mantle and wore it while he meditated and prayed for one hundred and eighteen days, his eyes closed the entire time. On the final day, Ichirai opened his eyes and gazed once more upon the world, then departed the mortal earth and flew into the sky as a crow, symbol of Shinsei's wisdom. The mantle was left behind, retrieved by a peasant farmer who had watched the affair from afar. Whether this tale is true or not, the Brotherhood of Shinsei believes it to be so and the mantle is regarded as a holy relic.

Mechanically, the mantle known as the One Hundred and Eighteen Feathers grants the wearer the ability, once per day, to spend any number of Void Points on a single roll. The wearer can also speak to crows (somewhat as though using the spell *Nature's Touch*). Rumor claims the wearer can also transform himself into a crow, although this has never been confirmed. If such a transformation did occur, the transformed crow would of course have to leave the mantle behind for another to find.



TOKIUIJI'S PRAYERS

Isawa Tokiuiji was the Master of Void during the time of the Gozoku. He is known for expanding the enrollment of the Isawa School until it grew beyond the confines of Kyuden Isawa. Tokiuiji created the title of Adept and had each of the Elemental Masters bestow the rank on five of their most promising students. Each Adept was in turn gifted with a position as a sensei, allowing many more students to train in the Isawa methods.

Less well known are the gifts of prayer beads that Tokiuiji granted to each newfound Adept to help them begin their school. Twenty of these mala (necklaces of beads) were created, five for each of the four Elements. Each set was carved from the wood of the Mori Isawa and etched with symbols echoing the chosen Element, and each quickly took on the physical properties of these Elements: mala of Air were light and hollow, seeming to float, while mala of Fire were warm to the touch and seemed charred on their outer edges.

The mala beads became known as Tokiuiji's Prayers, for the Master had whispered sanctified words over each bead before bestowing his gift. Each set grants the same benefit, but attunes to the Element for which it was created. An individual who meditates at least once per day with a set of these beads attunes the mystic nature of Void to the Element of that mala, allowing him to treat the Element as his Void for the purposes of making Raises and determining how many Void Points he possesses.

Kaidanshu and Koan – The Intangible Magic

It is said that all things within the Celestial Wheel possess a soul, even if that soul is not always “awake.” The kami within any object exist unaware of the world around them until something draws them out: either a forceful act of creation, or proximity to wondrous persons or events. Created nemuranai are called *shokunin*, while those jolted awake by events or personal influence are called *mijuku*. Nemuranai are as varied as the circumstances of their creation, but almost all of them are physical vessels – objects to be held and used. The exception to this pattern are the Kaidanshu.

Kaidanshu and their cousins, the awakened koan, are an extremely rare form of nemuranai which lacks a physical form. Kaidanshu are stories or tales, and koan are more focused philosophical conversations held with the self (or others). Each exists in a mundane state, but when awakened they – like physical nemuranai – become mystical vessels to contain power, purpose, and will. However, unlike other nemuranai, they exist solely in an intangible state – the words of an awakened koan echo in the mind, but on paper they are only so much writing. This enigma of ephemeral yet real power is what makes scholars associate Kaidanshu and awakened koan with the Void.





CREATION AND USE

Each Kaidanshu arises from either a powerful story (often one of the Kwaidan tales discussed earlier in this chapter) or a profound koan. They are created in much the same way as other nemuranai, and vary in power along the same parameters. Some are willed into being by a mystic (monk or shugenja) exerting close ties to the Void, while others awaken out of circumstance. For example, days of meditation on the One Hand Koan by a mystic potent in the Void could awaken a Kaidanshu quite suddenly.

Kaidanshu are more limited in their use than other nemuranai; their abilities usually only benefit the individual who created them or whose understanding brought them into being. Additionally, Kaidanshu and awakened koan cannot simply be “used” in the same manner as physical nemuranai. Each requires a brief but intense consideration of their meaning and “center” by the user. In game terms, this is either a Free Action or a Simple Action (as the GM judges appropriate) and a Meditation/Void roll, with a TN based on the power gained from the item. (TN 30 should probably be considered the base TN, since it is never easy to master the profound difficulty of true understanding.) A typical Kaidanshu may only be used once per day, since their profound sense of wonder is not easily invoked or replaced, and their duration tends to be short.

In game terms, a Kaidanshu can be created with Spellcraft, Meditation, or Storytelling, using the Void Ring and a TN chosen by the GM based on the potential power of the item. For spontaneously created Kaidanshu, any listener who perceives the “heart” or “center” of a story or koan might suddenly “see the Void” and awaken the nemuranai. The GM may also consider exceptional circumstances such as fasting for days or residing in a location with a deep connection to the Void.

GIFTING THE WISDOM

It may seem odd to think of ephemeral stories which can be freely told to others as “magic items” in any normal sense. However, simple recitation of a story does not attune the listener to the Kaidanshu’s gift any more than picking up a rare and unique weapon instantly grants the new owner its powers. Kaidanshu are not just mysteries, but brief glimpses behind the Void into the inner workings of the Celestial Wheel itself, and they must be mastered with care before they bestow their powers.

All that being said, a Kaidanshu may be “gifted” in a variety of ways. Perhaps a mystic creature, monk, or shugenja whispers an insightful truth and it dramatically attunes the character’s perception to the “center” of a tale. However, to pass on Kaidanshu is a gift, and requires a corresponding loss – one cannot both pass on the wisdom and continue to benefit from its effects. In game terms, a



Meditation/Void Roll (TN 35 or higher) should be required along with long hours of recitation, meditation, or pondering of the tale. Perform: Storytelling may be used in place of Meditation if the GM judges it suitable, but the Ring is always Void.

EXAMPLES OF KAIANSHU

Kaidanshu focus on the understanding of a tale as it relates to a task at hand. Their power is drawn from the enigmatic nature and mysterious qualities of the “fifth Element,” and there is no end to the power they may unleash. The examples listed below include both koan and some of the stories described earlier in this chapter.

ONE HAND:

“Two hands clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand?” When it is first heard, a koan is a static thing upon which to focus attention. After repetition, however, one can realize it is a dynamic thing – the act of seeking an answer allows one to see the self within the koan. When one realizes this identity, the “two hands” become one. The practitioner becomes the koan being understood; that is the sound of one hand. An awakened form of this koan allows a character to reach beyond normal limitations, exceeding the normal maximum Raise limit by one (or more if the character makes Raises on the Meditation/Void Roll to activate the koan).

DESTROYING ENLIGHTENMENT:

The great monk Hua Toa said: *“If you discover Enlightenment you must destroy it.”* Realization of this koan makes one aware that the preconception of Enlightenment as a separate and external thing is false and must be removed. It allows the user to deny connection to the Void in another who is unable to achieve this understanding. The master of this koan makes an Opposed Void Roll against a chosen target – if successful, the target cannot spend Void Points for a number of Rounds equal to the koan user’s Void Rank.

THE KISS OF KUCHISAKE-ONNA:

This Kaidanshu grants the user the ability to deny the passions of the body which the tale shows as so dangerous. The user is immune to any attempts at emotional manipulation (including Intimidation, Temptation, Fear, and similar things) for a number of Rounds equal to his Void.

SPIRITUAL DIPLOMACY:

This Kaidanshu grants the user skills based upon experience, but not necessarily his own experience. The character gains insight into a chosen skill for a single roll, making that roll with a number of Skill Ranks equal to his Void. This replaces any ranks in the Skill already possessed, and does not add on or grant Mastery benefits.

EXAMPLES OF MINOR AWAKENED KOAN

Each of the following awakened koan requires a Simple Action and a Meditation/Void roll at TN 30 to activate it. It then grants a +1k0 bonus to the next roll (within ten minutes) on a specific Skill:

Following the rules and protecting bureaucracy is binding oneself without rope. (Courtier or Lore: Law.)

Neglecting written records with unrestrained ideas is falling into a deep pit. (Any Lore Skill.)

To be awake and not ignorant is to wear chains and carry a boulder. (Any Intelligence-based Skill.)

A person who perceives thoughts as they immediately arise is tinkering with the Void. (Investigation.)

Without thinking of good or evil, show me your original face before your mother and father were born. (Lore: Heraldry or Acting.)









NAZO MORI THE FOREST OF ENIGMAS

Little Junchiro knew many of his playmates did not like to work in the fields, but he always enjoyed it. It was time he could spend with his father, and his father was always so funny. He was always saying funny things or making silly faces to make Junchiro laugh. His father was the best man he knew, so much nicer than all the other grumpy men who lived in the village. Junchiro never saw his friends playing with their fathers; their fathers were too busy.

Junchiro was still giggling over a silly song that his father had been singing a few minutes before. Now his father was busily trying to pry a large stone from the garden so they could finish the planting. Junchiro was not strong enough to help, so in the meantime he was enjoying the other thing he loved about working in the field. This one was a secret, even from his father, and he never mentioned it to anyone. He thought maybe they might make fun of him, or even be mad at him for something. He didn't like it when people made fun of him, and he really didn't like it when people were mad at him... especially his father.

North of the fields was the forest. It had a name, but they just called it the forest most of the time. No one talked about it much anyway. While he was working in the fields, Junchiro liked to look up at it from time to time. It was quite some way off, but he could still see things moving in the shadows at the treeline. He wasn't sure what they were. When he was smaller he had asked his father about it, and his father had not let him come back into the fields for more than a week. He hadn't liked that very much. But whatever the things were that were in the shadows of the trees... they danced. They were always dancing when

Junchiro watched them. They made him laugh, but he tried to keep it quiet. He did not want to upset his father any more.

"Look at this!" his father was saying, lifting up a stone the size of his head. "Look at this size of this turnip! We are going to eat well tonight, son!"

Junchiro laughed. "That is a rock, Papa!"

"No, this is a turnip," his father said seriously. "And I am hungry!" He brought it toward his mouth as if to bite it.

"No!" Junchiro shrieked, laughing so hard he almost fell over. "You will hurt your teeth!"

Papa stopped and squinted. "Are you sure this isn't a turnip?" Seeing him shake his head, Papa sighed and tossed the rock to the side, away from the field. "Oh well. Maybe I will find a turnip in a moment."

Junchiro kept laughing, but after a few minutes he remembered something he had heard the day before, something he had wanted to ask about. "Papa, Shunji-kun says there are samurai staying in the village. He says one of them is a scholar, maybe even a priest."

"That happens now and then," Papa acknowledged. "It is not that uncommon this time of year."

"Shunji says the man was asking about the forest."

Papa stopped work and glanced at him, which made Junchiro feel awkward. His father had that look that said he was thinking serious, grown-up thoughts. But he only said, "Oh?"

"Yes. Shunji says the man said there were ruins in the forest."

There was a clattering sound, and Junchiro turned to see his father's tools on the ground. He scooped him up in his arms and held him tight. "Papa!" Junchiro cried, surprised and a little frightened.

"Listen to me, son," his father said. His voice had turned all scratchy. "We never, ever talk about the ruins. Do you understand me? We never talk about them, not for any reason. There are no ruins."

"Papa!" Junchiro said again.

"Please," Papa said, his eyes watery. "I lost your mother, and your brother. I cannot lose you too!" And then he crushed Junchiro to his chest in a hug that seemed to squeeze all the air out of the boy's lungs.

As he was hanging trapped in his father's embrace, Junchiro looked to the north and saw the shapes in the shadows had stopped dancing.

Now they were simply... watching.



The Curiosities of Nazo Mori

In the grand scheme of things, Nazo Mori is not a particularly large forest. North to south it is about twenty miles long, and half that distance in width. Its outline is irregularly shaped, as one might expect, but can generally be described as oval. The true oddity of the forest is that it does not appear on any known maps, neither the maps maintained by the Imperial cartographers nor the maps independently maintained by local clan authorities. Cartographers familiar with the region are also familiar with the forest, but – for reasons that remain unknown – it has never been depicted on parchment. Occasionally, travelers of station pass through the region and are annoyed at the forest's absence from the maps, but any attempts to have the official documents altered are quickly quashed, oftentimes by members of the Imperial families.

To complicate matters even further, there is actually an official way station for the Imperial Cartographers near the forest's outer border. The Imperial Cartographers regularly travel the Empire, updating the maps that are kept in the Imperial archives in the capital. There is a single Cartographer stationed at the outpost at all times, a duty that usually lasts for several years at a time. Whenever a mapping expedition travels through the region, they come to the way station and the Cartographer on duty oversees the updating of the regional maps. Some Cartographers have questioned this practice, but the Miya family – who are ultimately responsible for overseeing the Imperial Cartographers – has politely declined any inquiries into the matter. Most traveling Cartographers are simply content to enjoy a short respite in the villages around the forest and continue on about their business, carrying maps they understand are not entirely accurate but which are required as part of the fulfillment of their duties.

A Brief History of Nazo Mori

Detailing the odd occurrences that have taken place around the Nazo Mori could easily fill an entire library, but most locals prefer not to discuss these topics, so most of these incidents have been lost to time and exist as little more than highly exaggerated anecdotes. Other than the occasional (and spectacularly disastrous) attempts by scholars to evaluate and study the forest and its alleged ruins, there have been only a few events here with enough impact to be officially recorded for history. In most cases, this is because the locals consider it extremely important to remember them... so they will not be repeated at some point in the future. This is an odd stance for peasants, and one that visiting shugenja find both highly interesting and mildly disturbing.

THE DAWNING TIME

According to infrequently recited lore, the villages in the region near Nazo Mori existed during the dawn of the Empire, making them among the oldest standing villages in Rokugan. Of course, many



villages make such claims, and if all of them were true then the Empire was fully formed long before the Kami ever fell from the Heavens. What sets this region apart, however, is that the villagers seem to take no particular pride in the claim and indeed are somewhat reluctant to speak of it at all. This stems from a legend that around the time of the Empire's formation there was some ominous astrological event in the region. Whispers tell of something that darkened the sky and then fell into the depths of the forest with such force that the resulting shock killed livestock in the villages... but did no damage to the trees of the forest.

This strange story has piqued the interest of a few scholars over the centuries. The one to most significantly delve into it was Otomo Tametsu (described in detail in the next section). In his later years, when his reputation was well and truly in ruins, Tametsu's increasingly erratic writings included a theory that the ruins within Nazo Mori were a perfectly preserved pre-human settlement whose creators had been eradicated when the corpse of the Kami Ryoshun fell upon them. (Or perhaps the ruins were still occupied by the entirely hypothetical and undiscovered race which he arrogantly referred to as 'the Tametsus.') Such nonsense found little favor in the rest of the Empire, needless to say.

THE LOST VILLAGE

Unlike many tales and legends from the region surrounding Nazo Mori, the story of the Lost Village can be verified beyond question. This particular legend is absolutely true... which makes it all the more disturbing.

According to the tale, there was once a fourth major village in the area in addition to the modern settlements called Sacred Forest, Iron Heart, and Laughing Plains. The village's name is either unknown or never spoken. Its people were perhaps less respectful of the forest than those of the other villages, and given to more frequent festivals and displays of merriment. It was during one such occasion that a group of villagers became inebriated and carried their celebration into the forest itself, lighting a great bonfire and dancing and singing long into the night. This much is known only because one devout villager fled the scene, fearful of the forest's wrath. Two days later, he returned to find the village completely empty.

What became of the more than two hundred souls who lived in the village is completely unknown. There was no sign of violence of any sort, no symptoms of catastrophe or plague, nothing to indicate what might have happened. In some cases food remained on the tables as if families had been preparing to enjoy a meal together. Cooking fires at the tea house had burned down, boiling away water and tea into black stains, but otherwise nothing was spilled or amiss. Every living soul in the village, even the pets and farm animals, was simply... gone.

Terrified, the people of the other settlements burned the entire village to the ground, leaving nothing but charred stones behind. Centuries after the fact, all that remains are a handful of old worn-down stones that mark where the foundations of the village once stood. The area is avoided by everyone in the region; it is extremely bad luck to step upon a grave, and the villagers consider the entire region as one huge gravesite, the place where a village died.



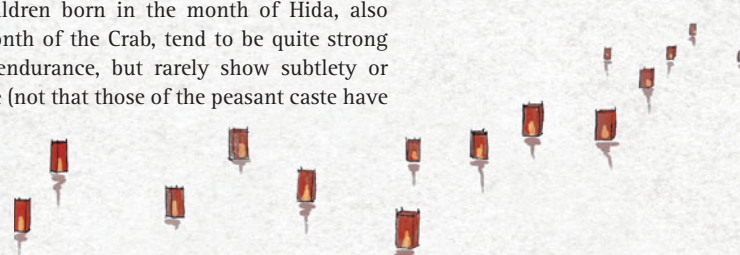
THE GREAT BEAST

Of all the peculiarities in the history of this region, the legend of the Great Beast is the one outsiders find the hardest to believe, and most visitors discard it out of hand as a mere folk tale or at best a gross exaggeration. As the story goes, on the first day of summer some three hundred years ago, there was an unearthly roar that split the afternoon air. Supposedly it was audible in all the villages in the area, meaning it could be heard literally for miles in every direction from the forest. Everyone looked to the forest in time to see... something that defied all logic and description, something that broke the mind of more than one person who witnessed it.

The head and upper torso of an enormous beast lifted above the canopy of the forest and looked around, its gaze falling upon every village in the region. Most of those who supposedly saw the Beast later claimed it was simply indescribable, utterly inhuman and demonic. A small handful gave more specific but contradictory descriptions, some identifying it as reptilian, others saying it was hairy and ape-like, and so forth. Regardless, the Beast surveyed the lands, then dropped back into the forest. Supposedly it was of such great size that the forest surely could not contain the entirety of its bulk, but this is just one more impossibility in a story that is already exceptionally strange even by the standards of Nazo Mori.

BLESSING OF THE FIRST-BORN

There are a great many things about the region around Nazo Mori that could easily be construed as negative or even disastrous. However, there are also many things that could just as easily be described as positive, and first among those is the strange phenomenon of the first-born. For reasons no one has ever been able to determine, children born on the first day of each month are somewhat different from the rest. They tend to display rather strongly the characteristics associated with the Great Clan whose name the month bears. This is not entirely positive, of course, since there are disadvantages associated with each clan as well. Children born in the month of Hida, also known as the month of the Crab, tend to be quite strong and have great endurance, but rarely show subtlety or sharp intelligence (not that those of the peasant caste have





much need of such things). Those born in the month of Doji (Crane) tend to be beautiful, those born in the month of Akodo (Lion) have tremendous agility and coordination, and so on.

As might be expected, this is one particular oddity that the local people have accepted whole-heartedly, and there is a great tendency for couples to attempt to have children based on when they might be delivered. Midwives are particularly valued in these villages, since they offer herbal concoctions supposedly able to induce labor at a particular time; those who seem to be able to deliver on such promises can command good prices. Of course, midwifery is hardly an exact science, and the vast majority of births take place on other days of the month; moreover, labors induced too soon by such methods can result in weak or sickly infants. Thus, while there are many exceptional individuals in these villages due to the first-born blessing, there are also many who possess significant shortcomings due to the unfortunate circumstances of their births.

The Secret of the Ruins

It is an open secret that there are ruins somewhere within Nazo Mori, allegedly near the center. The people who live near the forest avoid speaking of the ruins whenever possible, and will not do so unless ordered to by a samurai on pain of death. This strange phenomenon makes little sense to outsiders, but the families which have lived in the region for generations have seen the ruination that inevitably comes to anyone who becomes curious about the ruins. Looking for the ruins, speaking of them, even thinking about them... all these things lead to death or worse. So the locals simply do not consider them at all, and pretend they do not exist unless forced to do otherwise.

Many scholars have written about these ruins over the centuries, but few have managed to accomplish more than conceiving simple theories or making the occasional drawing. There have been a rare few who have managed to find out more. Their stories are among the most tragic of those who have visited Nazo Mori, and indeed are among the major reasons why the peasants refuse to speak of the ruins at all.

ISAWA HOBARU, THE BROKEN

The first scholar to truly delve into the secrets of the ruins was a brilliant and headstrong man named Isawa Hobaru. Hobaru lived during the fourth century; while traveling the Empire he met a man from the Nazo Mori region who told colorful stories his grandfather had shared with him as a child. Intrigued, Hobaru and his entourage traveled to the region and spent more than a year gathering information from the locals. Hobaru was an arrogant man but also a generous one, and the peasants enjoyed having him in the area, perhaps mistaking his loquacious nature for genuine compassion and camaraderie. After many months of gathering stories and inspecting various artifacts alleged to have come from the forest, Hobaru and his entourage set out to inspect the ruins for themselves. Many of them would never return.

Several days later, Hobaru and a few of his men emerged from the forest, dazed and confused. By their appearance they seemed to have been gone for far longer than a mere few days; Hobaru himself is said to have sported a beard of nearly six inches in length, when he had been clean shaven beforehand. None of the survivors were ever truly lucid after their return. After recuperating for three days, Hobaru himself loudly announced he must return to the ruins to finish what he had started. Exactly what he was referring to was not clear, but he and his men did indeed disappear back into the forest.

Three months later to the day, during the Hour of the Dog, Isawa Hobaru appeared simultaneously in all three villages around the forest's edge. He ran through the center of each village, screaming about the ruins wanting to take him back, then went berserk and killed three villagers in each settlement (two men and one woman) before self-immolating and burning away to ash. This event single-handedly crippled any desire for the locals to discuss the ruins or anything associated with them, although there were a few who blamed the problem on the madness of the Phoenix Clan rather than the forest itself.

Relatively little remains of Hobaru's research into the mysteries of Nazo Mori. Shortly



after reports of his death reached his family, Phoenix samurai visited the region and politely but firmly requested everything their cousins had left behind. The villagers readily complied, and those documents have never been seen in public. However, Hobaru was an avid correspondent with numerous other scholars throughout the Empire, and during the months he spent before entering the forest he sent many letters to different associates. Thus in certain circles it is still possible to acquire copies of Hobaru's collected folklore about the forest and the ruins.

OTOMO TAMETSU, THE DAMAGED

Seventy years after the disturbing demise of Isawa Hobaru, another scholar arrived in the region with the intent of investigating the ruins supposedly hidden somewhere within the forest. Otomo Tametsu was not a shugenja as Hobaru had been, but had a reputation as both a historian and a courtier; the former rather modest, the latter as an utterly merciless master. Tametsu was possessed of a pleasant demeanor, but tended to patronize and condescend to those he thought beneath him, and as a member of the Otomo family he felt this was more or less everyone. The villagers did not like him, but they feared him and their obedience was unquestioned. Tametsu did not require anything more. He had become embroiled in something of a feud with a descendant of Hobaru and his intention was to discredit the shugenja's memory as thoroughly as possible in order to punish the individual who had dared stand up to him in court.

Tametsu remained in the villages around Nazo Mori for a relatively short period of time. He perused the records left by other scholars, although he seemed disdainful of them, and promptly announced he believed the supposed ruins – if they existed at all – were nothing more than a forgotten remnant of the tribes from before the creation of the Great Clans. Bringing along a large escort, he forged into the forest like Hobaru before him, intent on a simple one-day excursion.

And like Hobaru did before him, Tametsu did not return on schedule.

Four days after his departure, a mildly bedraggled Tametsu and his entourage returned to the village from which they had departed. The others would not speak at all of what they had seen, saying only that their lord had instructed them to remain silent. Tametsu himself was much quieter than he had been, and when one brave villager inquired if the ruins had been what he expected, Tametsu replied they were “far, far older than that.” Shortly thereafter he returned to the Imperial City and never visited the villages of Nazo Mori again.

In the remaining years of his life, Tametsu authored a number of highly controversial texts that theorized the existence of civilizations that predated humanity and had fallen into decline and extinction prior to the rise of mankind in the mortal realm. Centuries later, some of his theories would actually be confirmed by the discovery of the City of Night, but during his lifetime Tametsu's claims

WHAT EXACTLY *Are* THE RUINS?

That question is entirely up to the individual GM to answer, of course. (Come on, you didn't really think we were going to spoil it for you, did you?) There are an almost unlimited number of options for GMs to pursue for their own campaigns, but based solely on the stories of the three cursed scholars, here are a few obvious possibilities:

A LIE. The ruins are not ruins at all. They are an illusion or a fabrication by a powerful entity from a different Spirit Realm or perhaps by one of the Realms themselves. The thin wall between worlds in this place has allowed it to create a lure that draws prey to itself. What it does with the prey is something entirely up to the GM, but as Isawa Hobaru discovered, the prey rarely survives the encounter intact.

A MEMORY. Before the rise of mankind, numerous inhuman civilizations occupied the lands that now make up Rokugan. The Naga and the Nezumi are two the Rokugani know about, at least in later centuries, but others like the Five Ancient Races remain largely unknown. Just as Rokugan contains many terrible places born from the activities of humankind, such as Mori Kage Toshi and the Tomb of Iuchiban, there are remnants of the ancient races that have festered and grown more terrible over the centuries. What nightmares might Otomo Tametsu have discovered in the depths of the forest?

SOMETHING COMPLETELY ALIEN. There are things in the world that have nothing to do with anything the Rokugani understand. The Ashalan from the Burning Sands, for example, are immortal beings who roamed the world long before samurai even existed. Likewise, things have entered the mortal realm from more distant realms that could have reshaped the world into their image in one way or another, and the results could have been hidden away in the depths of the forest for thousands of years. What horrors could be waiting, hungry, after so long?

gave him a bad reputation. In fact, his fortunes declined as his obsession with the ruins continued to grow. His writings grew steadily more controversial and eventually devolved into a bad joke; he appeared less and less frequently in the Imperial Court until his family decided he was no longer suitable for such duties. Soon afterward, one evening Tametsu walked into his favorite upscale teahouse in the nude. Thereafter the Otomo family removed him from the Imperial City to a remote and private estate where he lived out the remainder of his days in obscurity.





KITSU SHINJIKO, THE LOST

For centuries after Otomo Tametsu's visit, no one disturbed the quiet peace of Nazo Mori. However, one spring a Lion shugenja named Kitsu Shinjiko arrived in the area. Having stumbled across the works of both Hobaru and Tametsu, Shinjiko believed the ruins alleged to exist within the forest might be a remnant of the pre-human Kitsu civilization and she wished to investigate the matter, convinced it would be of tremendous importance to her family. Many others attempted to dissuade her from the task, especially the Phoenix and a handful of samurai familiar with the area, but her mother had been of Matsu blood and the interference only hardened her resolve. She was determined to find what might lie at the heart of the forest and learn whether or not it was of Kitsu origin.

Shinjiko went into the forest with a pair of yojimbo, never to be seen again. For several months after the disappearance, there were reported sightings of a trio of lions, a lioness and two males, skulking in the edges of the forest. One inebriated peasant who stumbled into the woods was found the next morning torn to shreds. Superstition among the villages reached levels of near hysteria, and for over half a year no one entered the forest at all, for any reason. The actual sightings of lions (which were not indigenous to the area) ceased shortly after the death of the peasant, but it took a great deal longer for the fear to subside.

Lion Clan emissaries eventually arrived looking for Shinjiko, and this caused another near-panic among the peasants, who feared the Lion would attempt some sort of mass incursion into the forest and arouse the wrath of whatever dwelled within. However, after a few weeks of investigation the Lion emissaries decided Shinjiko was not in the area and had only stopped there during a longer journey to an unknown destination. The Lion withdrew to continue their search elsewhere, leaving the villagers with a very unpleasant secret to keep.

The Villages of Nazo Mori

There are numerous villages on the plains around the Forest of Enigmas, since the region is extremely fertile farmland and rich in game, and boasts certain resources vital to the Empire. While there are many smaller villages, the three that are the most significant are located around the perimeter of the forest itself and are the largest in the province. Due to their locations, they are also the ones that experience the most oddities from the forest. Over the course of generations this has given rise to extremes of behavior that in the rest of the Empire would be considered exceptionally peculiar, maybe even as symptoms of madness.

SACRED FOREST VILLAGE

Centuries ago, Sacred Forest Village was an exceptionally productive settlement dedicated to the harvesting of lumber. Originally the villagers took trees from Nazo Mori itself, but after the horror of Isawa Hobaru's disappearance, that practice changed dramatically. The people of the village began to fear that their practices had offered insult to the spirits of the forest, and they significantly curtailed their efforts to harvest lumber. Since then the villagers have only harvested trees from the forest's outermost edge and any dead or fallen trees found within the first few hundred feet of its exterior; no one ever ventures so far into the forest that they cannot see the plains outside, believing that if they do so the forest will claim them and they will never emerge.

Predictably, these changes to the village's foresting practices significantly curtailed their ability to produce lumber in quantity. The village fell into relative obscurity and ceased expansion. Where it had once been on the brink of developing into a larger town or perhaps even a true city, Sacred Forest Village became merely a simple farming village with a much smaller role in the provincial economy. Fearing both the curse of the forest and the loss of their livelihood, the villagers took up some unusual practices: for every tree they harvested, they planted two more in the hope of maintaining their productivity without having to venture into the deeper woods. This practice eventually allowed Sacred Forest Village to remain an exporter of lumber, albeit in a much more limited capacity than in former times.

There are many eccentricities unique to Sacred Forest Village. Even countless generations after Hobaru met his fate, the people of the village fear the forest bears them ill will for their ancient lumber harvesting. Centuries ago, as part of this fear, the villagers sought to conceal themselves from the forest spirits by transplanting trees into their town. As a result, there is now a respectable copse of trees occupying the center of the village. The people of Sacred Forest Village believe these trees are (as the village name implies) sacred, concealing them from the hostile eyes of the other forest spirits. The presence of these trees has become part of the village philosophy, and anything that comes from them is used to create various protective tokens and talismans. The most common one is a small





wooden tile carved with intricate symbols – the exact symbols vary, but their purpose is always to ward against various kinds of hostile spirits. These tiles are very popular among peasants in the area, and it is common to find them in homes and on public buildings. The Toritaka family, well known throughout the Empire for their proficiency in dealing with ghosts and dangerous spirits, thinks well of these tokens and every year Yasuki merchants arrive in the area to purchase large numbers of tiles and carry them back to Crab lands.

It is important to note, however, that the villagers do not take wood from their trees without due caution. They typically harvest only excess bark and branches that must be trimmed for the good of the whole tree, and never do so in a manner that would harm the tree. Anyone harming one of the sacred trees is deemed a blasphemer and exiled from the village – if not simply killed out of rage and fear. Those who commit such heinous crimes are never spoken of again, not even by their closest family members.

IRON HEART VILLAGE

The second oldest village in the Nazo Mori region is slightly larger than Sacred Forest Village and is known for a different resource. The village is positioned roughly half a mile from the edge of the forest itself, placed among several large rocky outcroppings (such terrain is relatively uncommon in the province). The rocks contain abundant low-grade iron ore, and the villagers have been mining it in small quantities for centuries, careful not to take too much lest they exhaust the supply. This low-grade ore is not suitable for use in samurai weapons or armor, but can be used for the creation of ordinary tools necessary in daily life throughout the Empire. In previous generations the villagers traded the ore itself to other villages in order to obtain food and money as supplements to their meager crops, but in recent decades the village's fortunes have changed dramatically with the arrival of a tattered ronin called Watanu.

Watanu had spent decades traveling the width and breadth of Rokugan in search of his destiny. The closest he had ever come was a brief apprenticeship with a member of the Tsi family, an order of ronin who would later go on to form the Oriole Clan, but that lasted only a year; the Tsi decided Watanu's skills, while decent, were not sufficient for him to continue along the family's path. Discouraged, Watanu continued his wanderings until he came to Iron Heart Village, where he stayed for a few weeks during some bad weather that prevented travel. In those weeks he fell in love with a serving girl at the inn where he was staying, and in defiance of all reason the two married. The marriage of a peasant to a samurai, even a disreputable ronin, would have been scandalous to the point of persecution elsewhere in the Empire. In the distant and rural region of Nazo Mori, however, the peasants did not take issue with it and the whole matter was simply ignored. Most villagers were actually grateful to have a samurai tied to the fate of the town, since their fear of the nearby forest far eclipsed the normal fear they might have felt toward a ronin.

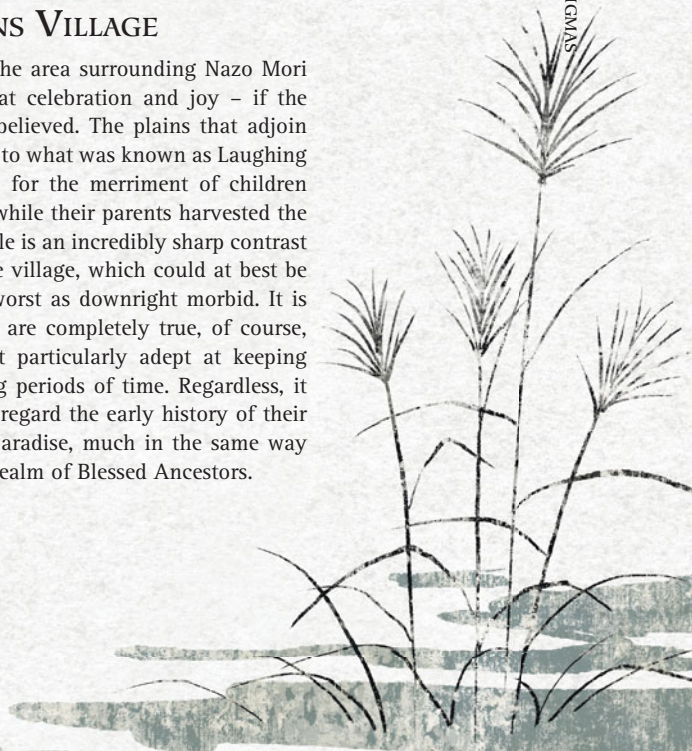
With the presence of a skilled smith, even one whose talents were judged inadequate for the Tsi family, Iron Heart Village's fortunes changed. Rather than simply trading their ore for other goods from the surrounding area, they could now convert that ore into finished tools and trade on much more favorable terms. Watanu brought more wealth to the village than the people there had ever known, and their quality of life increased significantly (at least by the standards of the peasant caste). This gradually overcame the villagers' remaining fear of Watanu, and by the time of his death many years later he was much beloved; his passing was mourned by the entire village for more than a month. Fortunately, he had two sons and had trained them in his craft. They continued his work, as did their children and grandchildren after them.

The descendants of the ronin Watanu continue to make Iron Heart Village their home, and although they do not possess a family name, they are generally considered "the Watanu" by the other villagers. The eldest in each generation inherits the katana the original Watanu carried, and thus they can still claim samurai status if need be. However, most have elected not to do so, since their life and activities would be seen as shameful to most "proper" samurai. In particular, they avoid mentioning their status whenever samurai of the more aggressive clans, such as the Crab, Lion, and Scorpion, pass through the area. There have been a few instances when Phoenix or Unicorn visitors have been made aware of the smiths' ronin status.

Because of their limited dependence on the resources of Nazo Mori, the people of Iron Heart Village are noticeably less superstitious than those in the other villages of the area. This is not to say they are not a superstitious lot... far from it. In fact, they are more so than people in most other parts of the Empire. Still, there are very few occasions for them to travel into the forest, so their collective desire not to think of it or to acknowledge the ruins within it is much easier to accomplish. The village is also home to more inns and teahouses than the others, so it is here that the vast majority of samurai visiting the area stay.

LAUGHING PLAINS VILLAGE

The largest village in the area surrounding Nazo Mori was once a place of great celebration and joy – if the oldest records are to be believed. The plains that adjoin the forest's edge gave rise to what was known as Laughing Plains Village, so named for the merriment of children who played in the fields while their parents harvested the abundant crops. Such a tale is an incredibly sharp contrast to the modern tone of the village, which could at best be described as somber, at worst as downright morbid. It is hard to say if the stories are completely true, of course, because peasants are not particularly adept at keeping historical records for long periods of time. Regardless, it is clear that the villagers regard the early history of their settlement as an idyllic paradise, much in the same way samurai view Yomi, the Realm of Blessed Ancestors.





Despite the odd contrast between its present state and its origins, Laughing Plains Village remains an incredibly productive farming village. The land around it is astonishingly fertile, seemingly able to yield tremendous harvests of any crops the villagers choose to plant. It is for this reason that the villagers do not relocate their homes; their samurai masters will not permit them to abandon such a valued resource, particularly when this one village contributes almost a third of the taxes for the entire province. As a result, the villagers at Laughing Plains consider themselves trapped, bound by duty to a sort of prison where they can be taken away by strange forces at any moment.

In truth, the people of Laughing Plains Village are paralyzed with fear, terrified to deviate from their daily routines in even the most minor ways lest they attract the attention of the denizens of the forest – who the villagers refer to, on the rare occasions when they acknowledge them at all, as their “neighbors.” Illness is somewhat more common than normal for a settlement of this size, perhaps because of the enormous stress the villagers live with every day. Even their children are viewed with a strange mixture of love and horror, for young children do not always understand the gravity of their situation. Usually by age six, most children have been so heavily indoctrinated that they too become somber and almost mechanical in their execution of daily activities. Those children who are incapable of suppressing themselves are often regretfully sent away to live with relatives in other villages.

Despite their mood, the people of Laughing Plains Village are relatively well off, at least by comparison to the typical peasants elsewhere in the Empire. As noted, their land is quite productive and they have more than enough food to sustain themselves even after paying their taxes and trading for other necessities of life. In keeping with their generally dour outlook, however, the villagers have little appreciation or even recognition of their prosperous state, and tend to spend all their disposable income on various trinkets designed to avert the attention of the spirits from the forest; Laughing Plains Village is the largest source of income for Sacred Forest Village’s spiritual talismans (aside from the Toritaka family).

Although the villagers are generally opposed to mirth, there are some distractions available. The level of income the peasants enjoy ensures there are some very pleasant tea houses in the area. Alcoholism is something of a problem in the village, but unsurprisingly it is not one that people discuss openly. Sake is often used both to suppress excessively joyful feelings and to overcome the worst of the sorrow so common among the villagers, and the local brewers make a very comfortable living even by the elevated standards of Laughing Plains Village.

Minor Villages

Although the three villages presented above are the largest and most important settlements around the forest of Nazo Mori, there are plenty more villages in the area whose history and culture have been shaped by the forest. A few examples of these follow, but the GM should in no way treat this as an exhaustive list, and feel free to add (or remove) villages as needed.

STRONG WALL VILLAGE

Although Strong Wall Village is technically part of the region which surrounds Nazo Mori, at least for administrative purposes, its inhabitants are quick to point out the difference between them and those who live closer to the forest. Standing at the edge of the region, Strong Wall Village claims stronger ties with villages in neighboring provinces than with any of those near Nazo Mori. Unfortunately for the villagers, since their home rests on the main road to the forest, they remain tied to it whether they want to be or not. This has led them to construct the wall which gives the village its name.

Although the wall is really just a wooden palisade and would not stand against any serious assault from samurai, it is sturdy and well-maintained. The villagers close the gates at sunset and patrol the wall until the sun rises the next morning. These patrols are not armed, but carry lanterns and keep watch on the outside area. These night watchers are all volunteers, and the locals have a number of dire stories about times when something was allowed to get inside the wall through lack of vigilance. They say whatever hides in the forest knows they do not belong here and resents them for it. It feels unfair to these simple farmers, who did not ask to live in this area, but they refuse to abandon the land they belong to, no matter the danger.

Relationships with other villages are colored by Strong Wall Village’s opinion of the forest. Interactions with the closer villages are kept to a minimum, and even when they do happen, the conversation tends to be limited. This has become even more pronounced under the tenure of the current Strong Wall headman, Goichi. A veteran of several wars in which he served as an ashigaru, Goichi is a strong-willed man who is not easily intimidated. He has encouraged many young men and women in Strong Wall Village to follow in his footsteps and become ashigaru, or serve as doshin or budoka to local samurai. This has slowly borne fruit, as much of the village’s younger generation now has at least some level of martial knowledge. Goichi has also stockpiled peasant weapons (those which can easily be passed as farming implements) in various locations around the village.

Some of the older village residents worry that Goichi is planning for some sort of conflict or revolt, although he has repeatedly denied this. Rather, he claims he is simply preparing for any possible threat from the forest; the people should be ready to defend themselves. And if any of the “lunatics” who live closer to the forest should be found somehow responsible for troubles in Strong Wall

Village – well then, it will be a matter of duty to act upon it. Goichi always keeps an eye out for traveling samurai, particularly from warlike Clans such as the Lion or the Crab. He hopes to find a samurai skilled enough to lead Strong Wall Village against the threats from the forest, lest his home become one more fearful village living in terror of Nazo Mori.

RICH FROG VILLAGE

When questioned about the name of their village (and its similarity with the far more famous City of the Rich Frog at the border between Lion and Unicorn lands), the locals answer with a smile. They say a merchant from that city passed through the area and fell in love with a farmer's daughter. Unwilling to leave her, yet also unwilling to give up his wealth for a farmer's life, he set up Rich Frog Village as a place of trade and entertainment for the surrounding area. The Kaeru family in the City of the Rich Frog say they have never heard of such a merchant, but the story remains popular here.

While Rich Frog Village only boasts a few hundred inhabitants, it acts as a marketplace of sorts for the entire region, and as such enjoys more wealth than one might otherwise expect in such a place. It looks larger than it is as well, due to the constant comings and goings between it and the other villages in the area. Restaurants, inns, shops, and even a geisha house mark it as a place where anything one wants can be found or bought. There is an almost constant air of revelry in the town, and the nights are almost as busy as the days. The village is a bit more distant from the forest than most of the others and seems to enjoy a relative truce with it; certainly the inhabitants do not seem particularly afraid of Nazo Mori or its mysterious denizens. However, many of the other villages think there is something disturbing about Rich Frog Village itself. There have been reports of people disappearing after visiting it, although these tales have been hard to prove due to the heavy traffic in and out of the town. These vanished people are never residents of Rich Frog Village; they are always visitors. Some say Rich Frog Village has made a pact with whatever creatures live in the forest to ensure its own prosperity. Others say the reason why Rich Frog remains safe is blood sorcery or human sacrifices that drive off the forest's influence. The Rich Frog villagers themselves dismiss such stories as the superstitious nonsense of jealous neighbors.

The most popular establishment in Rich Frog Village is a two-story building called the Bright Lights Tavern. Its prices and amenities are carefully calculated to make it appear fancy but accessible at the same time, and it enjoys popularity with peasants and samurai alike. The Bright Lights Tavern can become quite noisy and rowdy at night, but this is generally considered to be part of its charm. The workers at

the tavern are very well informed about events in the village and the entire province, and are usually willing to exchange pieces of information for a few coins. They can also arrange for a discreet gambling game behind closed doors, or more unsavory pastimes if the customer requires it. Their discretion makes it hard to pin any illegal activities on the inn – and besides, many samurai avail themselves of such services. Interestingly enough, the Bright Lights Tavern does not see the need to employ bouncers, in contrast to many such establishments which pay a ronin or keep a few strong peasants around. The genial mood prevalent throughout the village seems to be enough to ensure cooperation from customers, and the few serious troublemakers are usually just asked to leave and not return. This seems to be enough, for no one has ever heard of a repeat offender. The master of the Bright Lights Tavern likes to say this is because the customers are strongly united against any form of trouble and put pressure not to return on those who disrupt its peace... but here again, some rumors circulate. Some in the Nazo Mori region claim the Bright Lights Tavern quietly disposes of troublesome customers in a more permanent and deadly manner, perhaps even in a way that has something to do with the safety the village enjoys from the forest. Of course, such rumors are never mentioned within earshot of the Tavern. That would be a good way to be told to leave and never come back – and after all, there are only so many places of entertainment in the province.

PURE DIAMOND VILLAGE

If a bandit or a thief ever imagined Pure Diamond Village got its name from material wealth, he would be in for a surprise. In fact, this village is irredeemably poor, which is immediately obvious when one sees the dire disrepair of the peasants' houses. The local fields are too dry to grow rice, forcing the peasant to rely on other grains such as wheat and millet. Some of this is exported to other towns but for the most part the villagers must live on it themselves, with rice only a rare treat at best.





Pure Diamond Village is definitely a dreary and morose place, but its inhabitants do show a stubborn determination as they face their daily struggles. They are painfully aware of the dangers of the forest, which they blame for many of their misfortunes. But they have found some strength from a local monastery atop a nearby hill, one of the few monasteries in the area. The villagers treat the monastery with the utmost respect, traveling there to offer food and other supplies to the monks, often leaving these offerings at the doors without a word. This seems strange to outside observers, but the villagers consider it highly blasphemous to disturb the meditations of the monks. The monks, in turn, only visit the village when they deem it necessary, but always leave a strong impression when they do – for they belong to the Shinmaki Order, one of the most mystical and peculiar sects of the Brotherhood of Shinsei.

True to the nature of their order, the monks live in extreme isolation and maintain a high degree of spiritual purity. The villagers are not certain of their numbers, and it is believed some monks never leave the monastery at all. Others come to the village during times of importance, such as recruiting new members from the peasants, leading prayers after a death in the community, or defending the village against an external threat. This last duty is the greatest reason why the village respects the monks so much. Rumors of grueling initiation rituals amounting to little more than torture, of mummified corpses of monks still displayed in meditation rooms, or of scrolls bound with human skin and written in blood send chills down the spines of other peasants in the area, who usually give the monastery a wide berth. The fact that the peasants of Pure Diamond Village still consider the monastery to be their best ally for survival is a testament to the conditions in which they live and the shadow of fear the forest casts over them.

The monks themselves seem to have greatly varying attitudes toward the forest: some claim to have traveled it extensively and profess there is nothing in it to be feared for one who is truly pure of soul. Others refuse to set foot in it, and warn against a presence there which will darken the soul and warp the wheel of rebirth. They all seem to agree on protecting the village, however, and their dedication to the Diamond Sutra which they constantly study is the source of the town's name. With their usual disregard for etiquette, the Shinmaki monks dismiss any samurai expedition into the forest with utter contempt, particularly when it involves those they deem spiritually impure. When the expeditions invariably fail to return, the monks shake their heads in disappointment – and then return to whatever practices are hidden within the walls of their monastery.

EKIBYOGAMI'S LAMENT

Those who have studied their theology before coming to Nazo Mori know better than to approach this small village, for Ekibyogami is the Fortune of Disease, a being feared through all of Rokugan by lowly and great alike. Ironically, the village was once famed for its temple to Ekibyogami, where those sick or diseased came to pray for the Fortune's forgiveness in hope of being cured. The villagers were devoted to the Fortune and generally enjoyed good health; in fact, many of them crafted remedies from local plants and sold them across the region. The monks who tended to the shrine made only one command to the villagers: never, ever use any plant from the forest to prepare such remedies. For centuries, the villagers held true to this rule, and although good fortune came and went the people's health was seldom a concern.

Eventually, however, a farmer's elderly mother fell sick, and no amount of praying or care would bring her back to health. The farmer prayed day and night, for his mother was his only family, but the Fortune did not answer. The monks told him sometimes disease was just meant to run its course and bring life to an end, but he refused to listen to them. Then a stranger heard his tale and mentioned a plant growing in the forest which could cure his mother. The farmer did not think twice, and immediately set out to find the plant, using it to prepare a tea for his ailing mother. She immediately began to feel better... but on that very day, the monks of the temple gathered their belongings and left. They said they had received dire omens from Ekibyogami and the Fortune would no longer be able to protect the village. The villagers begged and pleaded, but the monks would not be swayed. Within a matter of days several people died of sudden illness, while others developed a variety of painful and unpleasant afflictions. The town soon developed a reputation as a place better left alone, and the few who attempted to leave it and move elsewhere were turned back – sometimes violently – by the other villages. Soon the village was renamed Ekibyogami's Lament. It is said the farmer's mother lived to be well over a hundred years old, far older than anyone in the village lives now. Of the farmer himself, nothing else is known.

Those few who dare visit Ekibyogami's Lament are struck by the appearance of its inhabitants. The weak die quickly, while the strong survive for as long as they can... before disease takes them as well. The villagers' skin is often discolored or jaundiced, and many wear bandages to hide boils, sores, or lesions. The lands around the village are still fertile enough to feed it and pay its taxes, but the inhabitants suffer from an endless array of afflictions, many of which are unheard of anywhere else in the region. The few houses still standing are usually kept in good repair, but the village has shrunk over the centuries as the survivors move closer together and the outlying houses fall apart. The ruins of the temple to Ekibyogami still stand, for the villagers remain remorseful for their betrayal of the Fortune's trust.

In this place where death is never far away, the small eta community has developed a strangely disproportionate influence, and represents nearly a third of the remaining

population – a massively greater proportion than anywhere else in Rokugan. The matron of the eta community, a woman named Otoha, is for all purposes the acting chieftain of the village. She is one of the rare few who remembers how to craft folk remedies, and although few of them can cure anything anymore, they can sometimes alleviate pain or limit the spread of symptoms. As she grows older, however, Otoha has attracted suspicion, for most villagers believe that no one can live to old age here without somehow consorting with the mysterious denizens of the forest.

SHALLOW WATERS VILLAGE

On the surface, little differentiates Shallow Waters Village from the multitude of other villages throughout the region surrounding Nazo Mori. It is relatively small, survives mainly by farming the surrounding lands, and lives in fear of whatever hides in the forest. The town's only claim to fame and the source of its name is its abundant supply of freshwater eel, which it harvests from several streams in the area and sells to the other villages for supplementary income. Aside from that, the village is wholly uninteresting... which makes the fact three samurai live there all the more surprising.

All three samurai have only arrived in the last few months, but it seems they are here to stay and the village has begun to adapt. The local teahouse has been expanded into a small inn, with better-quality food imported from larger villages. A smith from Iron Heart Village has come to offer his service in repairing armor and weapons, although he does not presume to touch swords. A few curious samurai have come through, following rumors of these three who have set up in Shallow Waters Village, further increasing traffic through the area. This looks very out of place in such a small rural village, and it makes the inhabitants increasingly nervous. Their only consolation is that so far none of the three samurai seem to have any interest in the forest.

The first samurai to arrive was Usagi Goro. Although he is a Minor Clan samurai, his appearance and behavior is more typical of a ronin, and other samurai have been known to mistake him for one. Goro does not bathe, shave, or cut his hair as often as he should, and spends a lot of time gambling, drinking, and sleeping – the latter happening anywhere from a straw mat in the inn's cheapest room to the street outside (when the weather is not too cold and he is running short on coin). The only thing marking him as a real clan samurai are his blades, which are well-kept and marked with the mon of the Hare Clan. The few who have questioned his ownership of the blades have quickly learned how well he can wield them, so his identity is generally not questioned anymore. In reality, however, Goro – while certainly enjoying his pastimes – is on the hunt for Bloodspeakers. The dying member of a cult cell mentioned Shallow Waters Village, and this fragmentary confession brought Goro here. Although he thinks it is possible the Bloodspeakers are responsible for the sinister legends of the forest, Goro knows his prey are all too human in nature,

so he is better off looking for them in the village rather than exploring the woods. Once he has established himself as a fixture of the village (and one easily dismissed), Goro intends to begin his investigation in earnest. In the meantime, he is content to watch for signs of suspicious activities while having a bit of fun.

The second samurai to arrive in the village is actually a ronin, but gets more respect than the Hare Clan bushi. She is a shugenja-ko named Asuka, and has served in many places in the Empire, from healing wounded on the battlefields of the Lion Clan to offering her divination services to courtiers of the Crane Clan. However, as the years passed and the clans never showed signs of offering any gratitude beyond coins, Asuka grew disillusioned and began to turn toward the peasantry. She found they gave far more sincere thanks for whatever prayers she offered on their behalf, and vowed to dedicate herself to their protection. She came to Shallow Waters Village in hope of finding a quiet place to settle down and protect, a sort of “retirement” as she nears the traditional age for samurai to do so. While Asuka is nervous at the increased presence of other samurai, she ignores them as long as the villagers are not harmed. Should the townsfolk be endangered in any way, she will be the first to stand with them.

The last samurai to reach Shallow Waters Village caused somewhat of a commotion. A woman named Mirumoto Kaguya arrived in full armor. She had clearly been in some kind of battle, to judge from the damage to her armor and the dirt and blood on her person and weapons. She initially sought only lodging and a bath, but has not left since. Every day, she wakes up and spends her time practicing – with her bow, with her spear, and with her swords. For those few who dare ask her why she remains in the village, she only says she is preparing – although even she seems unsure for what. Apparently, Kaguya is convinced Shallow Waters Village will be the site of a battle in the future, and she needs to protect it. Between this dire prediction and the increased samurai presence in the area, the villagers feel somewhat torn about Kaguya's presence. What makes it even stranger, though, is that passing Dragon samurai seem to agree with her on the importance of the place, and some have promised to return to the village in greater numbers. Needless to say, the villagers are not pleased at the perspective of becoming a Dragon garrison – especially since other samurai in the area might take umbrage.





Oddities Surrounding Nazo Mori

The strange qualities of Nazo Mori are not limited to the forest itself. Indeed, it often seems to those few who look into such matters that the strangeness of the forest is infectious, gradually leaving its mark on all the environments in its immediate vicinity. Some of those influences are merely curious, while others are truly strange and a handful are downright dangerous. The natives fear them all equally, having long ago learned that curiosity can prove dangerous in very short order when it comes to anything near Nazo Mori.

HOTEI'S BLIGHT

This unusually-named region is a lowland area bordering on the northwestern corner of Nazo Mori. Several streams feed into the area and it is essentially a bog, an unpleasant region filled with stagnant water, buzzing insects, and a perpetual dim fog that plays tricks on the mind. The region's name (which some outsiders consider blasphemous) comes from the Fortune of Contentment... who the locals believe has cursed the region. Anyone who enters the swamp alone, or even in small groups, returns... different. Happier. Unnaturally so, in fact.

Those afflicted in this way tend to have a pallor to their skin and a near-perpetual smile on their face... although the smile does not reach their eyes. Invariably, they alienate those around them with their peculiar behavior and mannerisms until they eventually lose all human contacts and die alone. Their corpses are always found surrounded by a large number of small leech-like creatures of unknown origin. The locals believe these creatures are not only the source of the unusual happiness but somehow a kind of plague that is contracted within the swamp. Usually the home of the afflicted is burned to the ground rather than risk infecting someone else, and not even those of the eta caste want to have anything to do with the "swamp-dead," as the afflicted are called.

THE ELDER TREE

Approximately three miles west of the Nazo Mori's outer boundary, there is a tree of extraordinary size. The tree is unlike any others that grow in the region, and although some scholars have compared it to a similar type of tree that grows in the northernmost Phoenix provinces, its exact nature is unclear even to the most skilled farmers and herbalists. The tree is thought to be blessed by the Seven Fortunes, although no one remembers where this belief originated. Regardless of such legends, the tree is clearly ancient, hundreds of years old at the very least. A few shugenja have communed with the spirit of the tree and determined that it possesses some rudimentary awareness, making it a sort of low-level living nemuranai. The locals believe the tree possesses secret wisdom which it can impart to those who sleep beneath it; such persons sometimes receive dreams or visions that grant them insight into their lives and the future that lies before them. It is not uncommon for up to half a dozen locals to make their beds beneath the tree in hopes of receiving such a vision. Of course, only a handful of them actually receive visions (or at least claim to have done so), but the "wisdom of the Elder Tree" is often invoked in attempts to secure marriage, favorable trade arrangements, or other desired outcomes.

THE GHOSTS OF THE FOREST

Occasionally, the local villagers make mention of "the ghosts of the forest," which visitors might find strange since they are so reluctant to mention the forest in any other way. This is a simple semantic misunderstanding, however; the villagers are not referring to actual spirits within the forest itself, but rather to a small band of ronin who are dedicated to preventing misuse of the forest.

The ronin band known as the Ghosts of the Forest is an exceptionally old group, having been in existence for many centuries. It is also an extremely small group, rarely numbering more than a dozen members, most of whom are part of a long line of wave men who have worked to protect the locals and the forest itself for countless generations. They are well known to the local villagers, and many in Laughing Plains Village are willing to give them some of their extra food in the hope that the wave-men may be able to prevent any more terrifying incidents from happening. The other villages offer different support as they are able, and the end result is that the Ghosts are able to eke out a modest existence without too much difficulty. They are fed and clothed and do not suffer the excesses of nature, but they are not wealthy by any means. For the most part, they are comfortable with this.

The Ghosts are a remarkably insular group, rarely choosing to have contact with any samurai outside of their own ranks. In the late twelfth century a rumor develops that the group allowed outsider into the ranks prior to the Clan War and that this individual went on to work with the famous Twelve Ronin, the personal vanguard of



Toturi the Black Lion. Some have gone so far as to suggest that this man was Toturi himself, but this is generally dismissed as hyperbole and wishful thinking. Regardless, the comparison between the two groups is often made to favor the Ghosts, who are admittedly superior fighters on their home terrain – but lack the experience and sheer innate talent that the great Twelve Ronin possessed.

Secrets of the Forest

Although nobody, samurai or peasant, is sure of what really hides in Nazo Mori, this does not mean the interior of the forest is entirely unknown. From the ravings of the scholars who explored the place, to the oddities glimpsed by bold villagers who step just a little farther into the woods, certain locations have become identified over the years. Whether the stories surrounding them are true is something few are willing to risk verifying.

THE GLADE

Nazo Mori is not particularly dense as far as forests go, but it has relatively few clearings. This makes the presence of the place simply called “the glade” even stranger – but there is much which is disturbing about it.

Supposedly, deep inside the woods stands a perfectly circular clearing. The thick grass would seem to indicate the soil is rich, yet trees never encroach on it. Even the animals of the forest seem to avoid the place. Some say that if one visits the glade at night and gazes at the sky, the stars look wrong. Apart from the Unicorn, Rokugani have never seen the stars in different configurations, and anything changing in the Heavens is a truly frightening thought to them. After all, stars and other celestial bodies are directly associated with the Fortunes and Kami. The few shugenja who have heard of the glade in Nazo Mori posit it may be somehow separate from Rokugan, but they disagree on whether this is a piece of another Spirit Realm piercing the veil or a part of the land which somehow never fell under the reign of the Hantei and thus remained untouched by the Celestial Order.

What makes the glade even more disturbing is that – if the stories are true – it is not always empty. Those brave enough to have approached the glade have sometimes reported seeing cloaked figures gathered in it, whispering to each other. Most stories have these figures disappear if anybody approaches them, as if they are ghosts or spirits. However, a few tales claim one of them turned toward the visitor, just long enough to show a face of eerie beauty. The locals disagree on what to call them: spirits, shapeshifters, ghosts, or even maybe just people. There also seems to be some disagreement on whether they are related to the taboo ruins or are something entirely separate. Some believe the mysterious figure who caused the downfall of Ekibyogami's Lament was a visitor from the glade, and have even tried to seek them out in hope of similar miracles regardless of the cost. Most return empty-handed, and a few do not come back at all. Regardless, the majority of the locals believe the glade is better left alone.

THE LONE TOWER

This is one of the few locations whose existence is known for certain, since it was mentioned by both Isawa Hobaru and Otomo Tametsu before their demise. Standing apart from the ruins of the forest, the tower looks like part of a castle's fortification, although no trace of other walls or buildings can be found. The architecture is not definitely identified, although Tametsu noted it somewhat resembled early Lion buildings from just after the fall of the Kami. Regardless of its origins, the tower is truly ancient, and its upper levels have long collapsed, leaving only three intact floors and hints of a fourth one. Tametsu and Hobaru both reported the tower to be haunted by ghosts, although they were not certain of what sort of ghosts they might be. However, they agreed the ghosts were the spirits of samurai, for they appeared wearing their weapons and armor. They manned the tower as if their duty had not ended with death, an eerie sight – particularly since the spirits did not seem troubled by the absence of a fourth and fifth level, and manned these as well. Interestingly, no peasant or eta has ever reported seeing the tower or its guardian spirits. Whether this is a coincidence or because the spirits hide the tower from their sight remains unknown.

Isawa Hobaru, as a shugenja, tried to communicate with the spirits. Although his later reports are doubtful given the trauma he experienced in the forest, some believe they hold a grain of truth. According to his writings, the tower was once part of a castle which belonged to a lord named Hozumi. He was ambitious and repeatedly petitioned his lord to be reassigned to more prestigious duties. When he finally was ordered to represent his lord in court, he gathered his followers to accompany him, but the guards of the tower refused to go with him. They had defended the tower for generations and could not accept becoming mere sentries in some pompous court, abandoning the duty of their ancestors. Enraged but unwilling to risk conflict with his most seasoned warriors, Hozumi agreed to leave them behind to guard the tower – but only the tower. He ordered his other vassals to destroy the rest of the castle, brick by brick, all the way to the foundations, taking the materials away with them so that only the tower was left to stand alone. Supposedly, the guards nonetheless remained and eventually died while still manning the tower, leaving their spirits to carry on this duty even now.

Many have questioned Hobaru's story, especially given the absence of any other information to give credence to it. Also, Otomo Tametsu saw the spirits and the tower but did not recount a similar story of their origins. But whatever the truth may be, there is no denying that a lone tower still stands within the forest, forever vigilant.





THE DEN

Scattered throughout the forest are rocky outcroppings which do not seem to belong there. Most of them are just curious oddities, but some of them contain tunnels and deep pits. Some of the less superstitious villagers believe those tunnels are a sign of tectonic instability in the area, and that they explain both the ruins and the disappearances in the forest. The ruins might simply be the remnants of an old village or city destroyed by an ancient earthquake or a sinkhole. The disappearances might be caused by careless travelers falling into pits or tunnels where they either starve to death or eventually find their way back to the surface in a confused and frightened state. The tunnels could be home to dangerous animals (such as bears) which could be mistaken for supernatural creatures, particularly at night. In fact, there have been a few known instances of ground suddenly giving way while people were walking through the forest, and some peasants have recounted tales of being rescued from a network of tunnels below the ground. Indeed, during periods of prosperity for the region when misfortune is rare and sightings of strange events can be more easily dismissed, the ideas that the tunnels are the explanation for all that is strange in Nazo Mori can become prevalent.

But at other times, some whisper of the Den.

A particularly haggard villager once returned to civilization, months after he disappeared into the forest and long after he was believed dead. His pale skin and the dirt on his clothes seemed to confirm what he told others: he had spent all that time in the tunnels beneath Nazo Mori, trapped after falling into a sinkhole. He scrounged water from underground streams and ate insects, rats, and bats he caught by feel. Finally he reached a gigantic cavernous chamber, lit softly by strange mushrooms growing amid the bones scattered on the floor. The walls of the room were covered in crude paintings showing strange inhuman figures... paintings made from blood, some of which was still fresh. When the peasant heard footsteps behind him, he fled, cutting his feet on the bones. He soon was lost again in the tunnels, nearly drowned when he fell into another stream, and finally awoke lying on the edge of a pond in the forest, having apparently been carried out of the tunnels in the stream.

Most villagers refused to believe his tale and simply decided he had gone mad. Their assessment seemed validated when he showed them a strange animal skull which he claimed had come from the caves. Although everybody agreed the skull was unlike any animal they had ever seen, the fact that he was carrying it with him clearly showed him to be insane. Soon after, the villager took his skull and left, saying only he was going "far away from the Den." His name is no longer remembered.

The People of Nazo Mori

Many samurai have visited the villages surrounding Nazo Mori at one point or another. Some of them believe they can solve the mystery of the ruins, but rarely find any success. Others come for their own personal motives; indeed, the area has a tendency to attract odd and unique people, perhaps drawn to the isolation of the region as much as by the mysteries surrounding it. Whoever they are, all those who come to Nazo Mori are seeking something.

This section describes a wide selection of potential visitors or inhabitants for the area surrounding Nazo Mori. It is entirely up to the GM whether any or all of these people are present, and characters can be excluded or modified to suit the campaign's location and the GM's setting and timeline.

KUNI ISAYA, SEEKER OF THE DEMON

From an early age, samurai of the Crab Clan are instilled with a sense of prudence toward the Shadowlands, none more so than those of the Kuni family. Since it is the duty of the Kuni to know as much as possible about their eternal enemy, even their children must learn to respect the dangers lurking in the dark places of the Empire. Thus, when young Kuni Isaya reacted with utter delight at being chosen to train as a Witch Hunter, her sensei saw this as a mark of dangerous bravado. However, Isaya perfectly understood what awaited her and simply refused to show the slightest trace of fear. She studied her lessons with great enthusiasm, and even took additional training in jujutsu to compensate for her small size. The very day after her gempukku, she packed up her modest belongings and started traveling the roads of Rokugan, seeking evil wherever it might appear. Several early successes cemented her reputation as a talented Witch Hunter, and her genial character helped offset the grim reputation of her family and order.

Isaya defeated all manner of creatures, from goblins to ogres to bog hags and even maho-tsukai. Eventually, she came across the trail of a Tokage no Oni. It took her years to even identify the creature, for it was considered barely more than a legend, a supposed unique creature which predated the existence of mankind itself. It had avoided the major conflicts between Rokugan and the Shadowlands, preferring to slowly accumulate its power in the shadows. It was said to be able to shapeshift into any human form, control the animals around itself, resist all but the most powerful spells, and do many other strange things – the sort of powers one would expect from a minor Fortune rather than a mere demon of Jigoku.

Kuni Isaya believes Tokage no Oni has committed dozens, possibly hundreds of murders throughout Rokugani history, sometimes for nothing more than its own pleasure. Although she still lacks key information,



like the creature's true appearance or a means to defeat it, she has resolved to destroy it once and for all. The quest has taken her years with little to no progress to show, and her superiors now worry that one of their best students is wasting her time on a fool's errand. But Isaya is confident she will succeed. She has followed what she believes to be the trail of Tokage no Oni to the Nazo Mori region. Whether the creature resides in the ruins, originated from them, or is simply hiding there for a while, Isaya does not care – she will find it and defeat it, no matter the cost. Her only worry is that she might, for the first time in her life, succumb to fear.

KUNI ISAYA, SEEKER OF THE DEMON

AIR: 3 EARTH: 3 FIRE: 4 WATER: 2 VOID: 3

AWARENESS: 4 WILLPOWER: 4 PERCEPTION: 3

Honor: 6.7 Status: 1.6 Glory: 5.2

School/Rank: Kuni Witch-Hunter 3

Skills: Athletics 4, Defense 4, Investigation 5, Jiu-jutsu 5, Kenjutsu 5, Lore: Shadowlands 5, Lore: Maho 3, Medicine 2, Meditation 3, Sincerity 2

Advantages: Bishamon's Blessing, Higher Purpose (defeat Tokage no Oni), Paragon (Courage)

Disadvantages: Small

KAKITA SANAE, SEEKER OF BEAUTY

Nothing initially marked Kakita Sanae for greatness. Her father was a corrupt magistrate, her mother a notorious rumormonger in the local court, both of them too petty in their characters and ambitions to truly accomplish anything but the superficial appearance of success. Both considered Sanae as nothing more than proof their marital duties had been accomplished, and after her birth they resolved to spend as much time away from each other (and from her) as possible. However, Sanae had a whole host of servants taking care of her, and they in many ways became her real parents. She sometimes wished for a brother or sister, but as the years passed she reluctantly accepted she was alone. She spent much of her time in the garden of the family home, where she would observe and play with the flowers and plants around her. By the time she reached the age to start her education, Sanae had become an irredeemably shy and reserved girl, ruining any potential career as a courtier. However, her peaceful demeanor and instinctive understanding of natural beauty made her a perfect fit for the Kakita Artisan Academy. Her instructors there only had to point her in the right direction, for she took to all arts naturally, ikebana in particular. Her social skills only marginally improved at the Academy, but since she constantly produced fantastic works of art, the leadership of her family was all too happy to ignore her limited social graces.

While for a long time she never left the lands of the Crane Clan, many traveled there to see her artistic works. She seemed destined to eventually become a sensei at the Academy, but she surprised everyone when she requested



to be freed from her obligations and allowed to travel the Empire. She claimed to have had a vision – not a spiritual or mystical vision, but a vision of beauty, of an artistic perfection so complete there were no words to describe it. Touched by the intense sincerity emanating from the normally quiet samurai-ko, Sanae's lord allowed her to do as she pleased.

Sanae refused to be accompanied by a yojimbo, for she did not want to waste the resources of the clan on her own personal quest. Instead, she traveled on her own, by foot, offering her artistic creations to local samurai willing to host her for short periods of time – often unaware they were in the presence of one of the Crane Clan's master artisans. As she traveled further and further away from home, her long hair grew more disheveled and her kimono began to sport tears and stains, but Sanae did not mind. She was looking for beauty in nature, after all, not in the trappings of man. Nazo Mori naturally intrigued her, for she had never heard of the place before her travels.

Kakita Sanae does not care about the mysterious ruins; she is drawn to the forest itself, which she finds to possess a unique but indefinable quality. While other samurai research the history of the place or mount expeditions to explore it, Sanae simply picks flowers and twigs for her ikebana, content to give birth to simple creations of ephemeral beauty.

KAKITA SANAE, SEEKER OF BEAUTY

AIR: 4 EARTH: 2 FIRE: 4 WATER: 2 VOID: 6

AWARENESS: 5 INTELLIGENCE: 5 PERCEPTION: 4

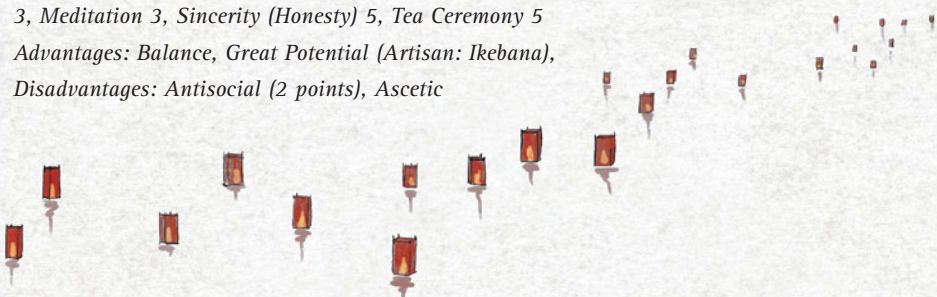
Honor: 7.8 Status: 1.0 Glory: 7.1

School/Rank: Kakita Artisan 4/Kakita Master Artisan 2

Skills: Artisan: Gardening 7, Artisan: Ikebana 8, Artisan: Origami 4, Artisan: Painting 6, Calligraphy 6, Courtier 2, Defense 1, Etiquette 3, Games: Go 3, Games: Sadane 3, Hunting 1, Investigation 2, Lore: Nature 5, Lore: Theology 3, Meditation 3, Sincerity (Honesty) 5, Tea Ceremony 5

Advantages: Balance, Great Potential (Artisan: Ikebana),

Disadvantages: Antisocial (2 points), Ascetic





TOGASHI MUTSUMI, SEEKER OF QUESTIONS

Togashi Mutsumi does not remember who she was before she came to the Dragon mountains. Or at least, that is what she says. Does it really matter? The self is an illusion, after all.

Mutsumi does not quite remember what she did yesterday, either. Not that it matters any more than who she once was. There is no one left in yesterday. Why should she go back? Better to be in today, with everybody else.

There are some who believe Mutsumi's memory does not function quite properly. They are wrong. Mutsumi has an excellent memory... but she only bothers to remember what she believes is worth remembering.

One thing Mutsumi does remember is the legend of Someisa. Shinsei had many answers to give, but only Someisa ever asked him for a question. Mutsumi has always loved questions. She used to ask her teachers to give her many questions, and they never refused her. Mutsumi learned a lot from their questions.

"Why are you here?" was one question her sensei once asked her. Mutsumi meditated long and hard on the answer, but could not find a satisfying one. So she started packing her belongings, seeing no reason to be there any more than anywhere else. She received her tattoo on the night before she left, and has only rarely been back to the Dragon lands since then.

Mutsumi loves Rokugan. Everyone has so many questions. Who are you? Where are you going? Why do you answer every question with a question? She loves them all, the questions, the people. Everything is so invigorating.

A young, poor peasant girl once asked Mutsumi: "Why are you alive?" Mutsumi thought it was a great question, and decided to start meditating on it. She did so immediately, without sitting down, and kept at it for days. This did not seem strange to her. After a time – villagers told her it was weeks, but she was not so sure – Mutsumi decided the most important truth, right now, was that she was hungry. Why was she alive? She did not know. But then again, she was looking for questions, not answers. So she moved on.

All those travels left her quite tired, though. It must have been obvious, for a monk asked her: "Why don't you take a break?" So Mutsumi did. She settled in a nearby village, and stopped meditating or training. She just helped with the crops, ate, laughed, and slept.

She might have gotten married. She might have had a child. She does not remember. She only knows that for years she was a villager like any other. People might even have forgotten she was a tattooed monk from the Dragon Clan. She certainly forgot herself.

"What's hiding in Nazo Mori?" someone one asked around Mutsumi, not even to her. But it was such a great question that she could not ignore it. She left her village life behind and resumed the life of a tattooed monk.

Now she roams the perimeter of the forest. Local villagers have cautioned her against looking for too many answers, but Mutsumi just dismisses their concerns with a laugh.

She is looking for questions, not answers.

TOGASHI MUTSUMI, SEEKER OF QUESTIONS

AIR: 3 EARTH: 3 FIRE: 3 WATER: 3 VOID: 4

Honor: 3.6

Status: 1.0

Glory: 3.2

School/Rank: Togashi Tsurui Zumi 4

Skills: Athletics 5, Craft: Farming 3, Defense 4, Etiquette 1, Hunting 3, Investigation 5, Jiu-jitsu 5, Lore: Theology (Shintao) 5, Medicine 2, Meditation (Void Recovery) 7

Advantages: Absolute Direction, Seven Fortunes' Blessing (Hotei)

Disadvantages: Driven, Soft-Hearted

Tattoos: Ocean, Void

Kiho: Buoyed by the Kami, Channel the Fire Dragon, Chi Protection, Cleansing Spirit, Riding the Clouds, The Body Is an Anvil, Touch the Void Dragon, Void Fist

Note: If the campaign takes place in the appropriate era, Mutsumi can be a member of the Hoshi family, with the appropriate change in family name.

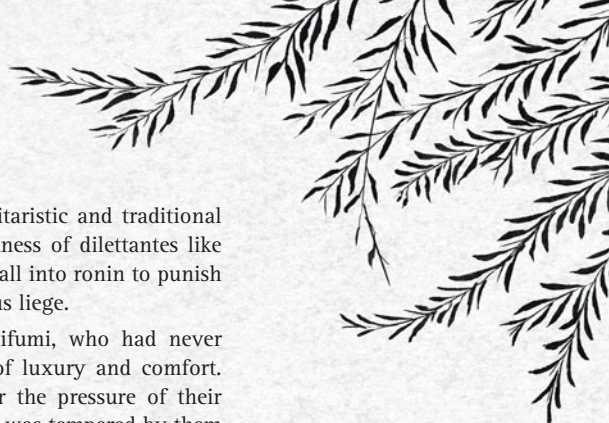
MATSU KURENAI, SEEKER OF PEACE

Many children of the Matsu show ferocity from an early age, a tendency which is usually encouraged by the warrior family. Consequently, Matsu Kurenai's parents were initially disappointed in her, for she showed no desire for conflict of any kind. She was bright and cheerful and got along with everyone. She was enrolled in a local dojo with a tough Matsu sensei, and her parents feared she would crumble under his harsh teachings, but instead she blossomed. It was soon clear that although Kurenai had no personal desire for violence, she was still a Matsu and would fight as fiercely as any other.

Her true destiny only became apparent when a Beastmaster visited the dojo, looking for potential apprentices. Although he initially dismissed Kurenai as too meek, she approached one of his warcats without fear and stroked it on its back as if it were a simple pet. It was clear the animals did not see Kurenai as either a threat or as prey, but rather as a fellow member of their pride. Impressed, he immediately requested Kurenai train under him as a Beastmaster, and she left her dojo that very day.

After her gempukku, Kurenai joined the armies of her clan as was expected of her. Although becoming a Beastmaster required an almost spiritual bond with the warcats, in practice it meant bloodshed of the most terrible kind. Time and time again, she and her companions descended upon the enemies of the Lion, ripping their bodies apart with sword and claws and teeth. Kurenai did as she was asked, but lost many friends, human and feline, over the course of many battles. Eventually the years started to blur in her mind, and by the time she was





nearing the age of retirement, Kurenai had little but scars to show for her service.

She retired from active duty, but did not have any urge to join a monastery, nor did she feel the call to become a sensei. Instead, Kurenai took her favorite warcats and started exploring the wilds of Rokugan, far from the population centers where her lions might cause trouble. Kurenai experienced peace for the first time in her life, and although part of her missed her fellow samurai, she knew her soul was too tired of fighting to return. She stumbled upon Nazo Mori during her travels and settled in one of the smallest villages, appreciating the quietness of the place.

Kurenai dismisses the legends surrounding the ruins as nonsense; at best they are a way to keep troublemakers away from the region, which she appreciates. The villagers were terrified of her warcat companions at first, but as time passed and nothing violent happened, they grew to appreciate the extra security they provided. A few bandits have fallen afoul of the pride; Kurenai may be looking for peace in her life, but she is still a Lion, dangerous to anger.

MATSU KURENAI, SEEKER OF PEACE

AIR: 3	EARTH: 4	FIRE: 3	WATER: 2	VOID: 3
STRENGTH: 4				
Honor: 5.8	Status: 2.8	Glory: 3.8		

School/Rank: Matsu Beastmaster 3

Skills: Animal Handling (Lions) 6, Athletics 5, Battle 4, Defense 5, Hunting 4, Iaijutsu 3, Jiu-jutsu 4, Kenjutsu (Katana) 5, Knives 4, Lore: History 3, Medicine 2, Spears 3

Advantages: Balance, Strength of the Earth

Disadvantage: Doubt (Battle)

Kata: Striking as Fire

TSURUCHI AKIFUMI, SEEKER OF VENGEANCE

When strangers first meet Tsuruchi Akifumi, they find him to be the perfect image of a Tsuruchi magistrate: lean, focused, taciturn, absolutely dedicated to hunting down criminals, a testament to the talents of his family. It is quite a surprise for them to learn Akifumi was once a courtier of the Lion Clan. Born to a wealthy branch of the Ikoma family, Akifumi led an honorable but idle life, content to enjoy the gossip of the courts and the pleasures of life. He respected the soldiers of his clan, but they were a distant concern to him, and violence and death were usually far from his mind. It was a great shock to Akifumi when his lord was assassinated by an unknown assailant. Many of the late lord's vassals were transferred to a

new daimyo of a much more militaristic and traditional mindset. Disgusted with the weakness of dilettantes like Akifumi, the new lord made them all into ronin to punish them for the death of their previous liege.

This was a huge shock to Akifumi, who had never experienced anything but a life of luxury and comfort. But while the others broke under the pressure of their bleak new circumstances, Akifumi was tempered by them and came to realize he had failed to be a true samurai. Deciding to make one last attempt to serve his old lord, Akifumi resolved to find the murderer and kill him... although he lacked any of the skills needed for such a quest.

After collecting as much information as possible, Akifumi used the last of his personal fortune to buy weapons and armor, and started offering his services as a mercenary and bounty hunter. He nearly died several times, but slowly he learned how to be a tracker, warrior, and archer. Finally he approached the Tsuruchi family for help, pledging his allegiance in return for their assistance in finding his previous lord's murderer. Impressed by his sincerity and sympathetic to his quest as only Mantis could be, the Tsuruchi accepted.

Akifumi's investigations eventually led him to several other such murders recorded in the archives of the Tsuruchi family. He became convinced the assassin was related to the mystery of Nazo Mori and made his way there to question the locals. Needless to say, the peasants are deeply disturbed by the magistrate's questions, which challenge many of their taboos. Akifumi does not take kindly to a lack of cooperation, and after a few solid beatings of the more recalcitrant peasants he has begun obtaining answers. Unfortunately, this attitude has attracted hostile attention from other samurai in the area, but Akifumi could care less – he will see his quest to the end, even if it is the last thing he ever does.





TSURUCHI AKIFUMI, SEEKER OF VENGEANCE

AIR: 3 EARTH: 3 FIRE: 3 WATER: 2 VOID: 3

PERCEPTION: 3

Honor: 3.2 Status: 2.4 Glory: 3.6

School/Rank: Ikoma Bard 1/Tsuruchi Bounty Hunter 1

Skills: Athletics 3, Investigation 2, Courtier (Gossip) 3, Defense 3, Etiquette (Conversation) 3, Hunting (Tracking) 4, Intimidation 4, Kenjutsu 3, Kyujutsu 4, Lore: History (Lion Clan) 1, Lore: Underworld 4, Perform: Storytelling 3, Sincerity (Honesty) 4

Advantages: Multiple Schools, Precise Memory

Disadvantage: Black Sheep, Driven (avenge his former lord)

Kata: Strength of the Mantis

ASAKO HINATA, SEEKER OF BALANCE

On the surface, nothing distinguishes Asako Hinata from other monks of the Asako family. She is a friendly and helpful individual who loves nothing more than travelling the roads of Rokugan to meet new people and help them along the Path of Man. After a while, though, people notice that something about her seems a little off. She always seems somewhat distracted, always a bit slow to pick up on social cues. This can range from the comically awkward, such as when she walked straight into the trajectory of a snowball during a winter's fight between children, to the very dangerous, such as the time she was found with ronin bandits who had managed to convince her they were in need of spiritual guidance.

The truth was detected by Hinata's sensei early in her training. She is one of the worst cases of Elemental imbalance ever seen in her family. Her Air is incredibly weak, and the kami of Air themselves seem to shun her. This is made all the worse by the fact that her Water is exceptionally strong, and the kami of Water are very fond of her. No explanation has ever been found for this imbalance, which has been part of her life since her very childhood. Only through the greatest perseverance was Hinata able to pass her gempukku, finally understanding the Mystery of Air after many years of laborious effort.

Hinata realizes that if she wishes to complete the Path of Man and one day ascend to divinity, she will have to learn the Riddle of Air, and her weakness will make this quite difficult. She has tried everything she can to strengthen her Air, from visiting temples dedicated to the Air Dragon to studying extensively with Air shugenja, even attempting to learn kyujutsu to sharpen her instincts. All of these efforts have ended in complete failure, and Hinata has begun to wonder if she is not merely imbalanced but cursed. Trying to find an answer to her condition, she has been searching for places with unusual spiritual natures, placed where the Elements are imbalanced in extreme ways leading to strange phenomena. When Hinata heard of Nazo Mori, she became convinced the forest suffered from an affliction similar to hers, which would explain the strange stories surrounding it. Although little has been found to support her theory, Hinata says this is because people are looking at symptoms rather than the root cause.

Most samurai think the Phoenix monk is simply crazy, but – of course – Hinata usually fails to notice what others think of her. And while the villagers have much more respect for her, they have begun to worry she will soon go into the forest and meet her end like so many before her. After all, if she cannot dodge a snowball, she has little chance of surviving whatever hides in the ruins.

ASAKO HINATA, SEEKER OF BALANCE

AIR: 1 EARTH: 3 FIRE: 3 WATER: 4 VOID: 2

PERCEPTION: 5

Honor: 5.6 Status: 1.0 Glory: 2.2

School/Rank: Asako Henshin 2

Skills: Athletics 3, Calligraphy 1, Investigation 4, Jiu-jutsu 4, Kyujutsu 1, Lore: Elements (Water) 5, Lore: Theology 3, Medicine 3, Meditation 3

Advantages: Elemental Blessing (Water), Friend of the Elements (Water)

Disadvantage: Weakness (Awareness), Weakness (Reflexes), Wrath of the Kami (Air)

Kiho: Chi Protection, Ride the Water Dragon





NINUBE OSAMU, SEEKER OF VOICES

Most L5R campaigns will take place in eras where the “Spider Clan” does not exist. However, for GMs whose campaigns do include the Spider, the following NPC is presented. Ninube Osamu can also be used as an agent of the Lying Darkness in campaigns set outside of the Spider era.

The inhabitants of the villages surrounding Nazo Mori have many reasons to be frightened. Some of these come from the forest, some from the outside world, and some... well, no one is quite sure where they come from. One of these is the so-called Voice Thief.

According to the legend, there was once a great singer named Kakita Osamu. His voice was unique in his generation, and he traveled through most of the Empire, giving performances before the greatest of lords. Some say he even sang for the Emperor, and the Son of Heaven was so moved he shed a single tear in reaction to Osamu’s song. The only places Osamu never sang were in the lands of the Dragon Clan, so when he was finally invited to go there, he went immediately and eagerly. However, by the time he arrived winter had begun and he found himself stuck in the mountains for the whole season. Unused to the harsh climate, Osamu fell terribly sick. It took him weeks to recover, and his voice was ruined, left barely more than a whisper. Despite consulting with the greatest scholars of medicine and the most powerful shugenja, Osamu could not restore his voice. Some said the Fortunes had cursed him for his pride. Osamu knew he would give anything to recover his voice. Every night, he went to sleep whispering to the darkness, asking for his voice back.

And one night, the darkness answered.

The darkness gave Osamu strange and terrifying powers. He became more of a shadow than a man, skulking in dark places. Nazo Mori was the perfect place for him, full of darkness and places nobody ever went to. But all Osamu really wanted was to sing, so he kept a close eye on the villages nearby. When he found someone whose voice he liked, be they old or young, man or woman, rich or poor, Osamu would follow them home. If they paid close attention, they might even hear Osamu hum a tune along the way. If they remained silent until the Sun came up, Osamu would leave them alone. But if they spoke, if they made even a single sound, he would take their voice and add it to his own.

When a villager is found in the morning terrified and unable to speak, others know the Voice Thief has struck again. Those who know of Osamu remain silent after sunset, lest he take their voice away as well – but the Voice Thief is clever, and knows ways to coax a sound from even the most resolute. Many samurai believe the Thief is nothing more than a story, just another peasant superstition. But others, particularly in the Scorpion Clan and Unicorn Clan, pay close attention when they hear this story, and are careful not to speak too much at night... particularly if they hear a tune nearby.

GM’s NOTE: If Osamu is being used in a timeline in which the Spider Clan exists, he can function as an ally for Spider PCs. As a minion of the Shadow Dragon, Osamu sees and hears much and can provide all sorts of covert information. However, he is likely to demand a new voice for his collection as payment for his efforts – not necessarily the voice of whoever contacted him, but one he finds attractive.

NINUBE OSAMU, SEEKER OF VOICES

Air: 4	Earth: 2	Fire: 3	Water: 3	Void: 2
Agility: 4				
Honor: 0.0	Status: N/A	Glory: 0.0	Infamy: 3.6	

School/Rank: Ninube Shugenja 3

Skills: Calligraphy 3, Defense 5, Intimidation 5, Investigation 5, Knives 4, Perform: Song 8, Sincerity (Lying) 5, Spellcraft 5, Stealth 6

Advantages: Silent, Voice

Disadvantages: Insensitive, Momoku

Spells: Sense, Commune, Summon, Cloak of Night, Way of Deception, Hidden Visage, Extinguish, Envious Flames, Reflections of Pan Ku, Wave-Borne Speed, Hurried Steps, The Eye Shall Not See, Gift of the Wind, False Realm, Netsuke of Wind

Special Ability: *Osamu has been granted the ability to steal voices. When he is within three feet of victims who are either sleeping, helpless, or unaware of his presence, Osamu can attempt to steal their voices. This takes three Rounds and is resolved by three successive Contested Rolls of the victim’s Earth against Osamu’s Air.*

Neither Osamu nor the victim can take any Actions other than to make these Contested Rolls. If Osamu wins at least two out of three rolls, the victim becomes permanently mute and Osamu gains the ability to perfectly mimic his voice. At the GM’s discretion, the trauma to the victim can also be represented by a Disadvantage, such as Weakness (Willpower or Awareness) or a Phobia. The only for a victim to regain his voice is to destroy Osamu.



YOGO WAKAKO, SEEKER OF DEATH

Most samurai of the Scorpion Clan are intimidating figures, standing on their clan's infamous reputation for inflicting death, dishonor, or fates even worse. Yogo Wakako also gives off an intimidating impression, but for a different reason: it is the pain she feels that makes her so disturbing.

Wakako is a tall figure dressed in black and crimson, and wears a mask displaying a perpetually crying face. She speaks little, and a single glance from her has been known to put an end to entire conversations. Those who dare speak of her say she has the eyes of the dead, and the scurrilous suggest she may in fact be dead herself. But Wakako is alive, as those who have witnessed her anger can attest. The pain she feels leads her to lash out against any perceived threat, whether it be enemies of the Scorpion, criminals, or worst of all Shadowlands creatures. She seeks to destroy them all, usually with no regard for her own safety. Her superiors in the Scorpion seem to appreciate her as an obvious threat in their arsenal, but leave her to her own devices except when they have need of her. She spends many of her days praying at various shrines and temples.

Yogo Wakako was not always like this. In a previous life she was a minor shugenja in the Scorpion lands, with a husband and a child. She knew of the curse which haunts the Yogo bloodlines, but nonetheless she was happy with her simple life. And it was impossible not to love her son, watching him grow and learn to walk, to talk, and to play.

All it took to end her happiness was a moment of inattention. That was Wakako's betrayal: inattention. By the time they retrieved her son from the river, it was too late. Wakako was devastated. Like any member of her family, she knew it was the curse of her ancient ancestor which had led to this tragic incident... yet she could not forgive herself. Her husband never blamed her, which somehow made it even worse. She wanted the world to blame her, to condemn her, but nobody did... so she took it upon herself to do so. She left home and began looking for a way to die. She did not feel worthy of seppuku, so

she hoped for someone, anyone, to end her life for her. But all of her attempts have instead resulted in the destruction of others, for she is still too loyal to her clan to submit to foes without a fight. So she keeps going from danger to danger, hoping to find her own end, praying for the soul of her child in her moments of peace.

In the villages around Nazo Mori, Wakako is known as a lonely figure who barely interacts with the population aside from her maintenance of religious sites. She is sometimes seen near the forest, but since the villagers are almost as scared of her as they are of the ruins inside, they say nothing to her. She hopes the reputation of Nazo Mori is real; if whatever hides in the ruins does not kill her, she will burn the whole place to the ground.

YOGO WAKAKO, SEEKER OF DEATH

AIR: 3 EARTH: 3 FIRE: 4 WATER: 3 VOID: 2

Honor: 1.7 Status: 1.1 Glory: 3.4

School/Rank: Yogo Wardmaster 3

Skills: Calligraphy (Cipher) 3, Etiquette 3, Intimidation 5, Investigation 3, Lore: Theology 3, Spellcraft 5, Stealth 4

Advantages: Touch of the Spirit Realms (Meido)

Disadvantage: Lost Love (Son)

Spells: Sense, Commune, Summon, By the Light of the Moon, Envious Flames, Extinguish, Haze of Battle, Jade Strike, Jurojin's Balm, Path to Inner Peace, Summon Fog, Symbol of Fire, The Fires From Within, The Fist of Osano-Wo, Ward of Purity

UTAKU NORIKO, SEEKER OF REDEMPTION

A battle maiden dreams of nothing but glory in war. Others can concern themselves about politics, marriage, or spirituality, but for a shiotome there is nothing but her mount, her weapon, and her sisters. Utaku Noriko was no different, and as a child she could barely wait for the opportunity to fight for her clan on the field of battle. Her sensei, their passion tempered by a lifetime of experience, cautioned her against excessive bravado. A true battle maiden, they said, did not relish violence but accomplished her duties to the clan with silent courage. Although Noriko always agreed respectfully, she still burned to prove herself, and after passing her gempukku she requested to be stationed on the border with the Lion Clan. Even during times of peace this was always a tense area, as the clans would periodically test each other in skirmishes. So, when a patrol of Lion Clan samurai passed the border, she raced to warn her squadron; they gathered their forces and struck back. The battle was fierce and the Lion fought as true samurai, but the Unicorn warriors were victorious. For one moment, Noriko felt an immense pride in her heart. She had defeated the enemies of her clan, shed their blood and hers in the name of honor. She was truly a samurai.

The feeling stopped the moment she noticed smoke on the horizon.



Noriko rode as fast as she could, her horror growing as she realized what had happened. While she was gathering her comrades for a counterattack, the Lion had passed through a small village and put it to the torch. The place was a desolation, peasants emerging from smoldering ruins, children covered in dirt, corpses lying in the street. Her comrades were enraged at the Lion's attack on their people, but Noriko was shocked at her own actions. So eager to gain glory for herself, she had completely forgotten why they were fighting: to protect their own people. Had she stayed in the village she would probably have died, but the village could have been evacuated and many more lives would have been saved. She realized she was just a child playing at being a samurai. No more, she swore. She would never again allow people to be harmed while she stood by. Her fiery passion was replaced by a cold dedication.

Utaku Noriko was reassigned to escort the Ide merchant caravans which traveled the Empire, protecting the people of the Unicorn wherever they went. She spent months on this duty, but when she passed through the Nazo Mori province and heard how the villagers lived in permanent fear, she knew she had to act. She stayed behind when the caravan continued, vowing to protect the people from whatever was hidden in the ruins.

The locals are torn between appreciating Noriko's devotion and shaking their heads at the futility of her actions. So they have accepted her presence as a silent but dedicated protector, a woman who still has not forgiven herself for her past errors.

UTAKU NORIKO, SEEKER OF REDEMPTION

AIR: 3	EARTH: 3	FIRE: 3	WATER: 2	VOID: 2
AGILITY: 4		STRENGTH: 3		
Honor: 6.8		Status: 1.5		Glory: 3.5

School/Rank: Utaku Battle Maiden 2

Skills: Animal Handling 3, Battle 3, Defense 3, Etiquette 1, Horsemanship 6, Iaijutsu 3, Investigation 1, Kenjutsu (Katana) 5, Spears (Lance) 5, Sincerity 3

Advantages: Irreproachable, Quick

Disadvantage: Brash

Kata: Striking as Earth, Striking as Fire

SEPPUN JINPACHI, SEEKER OF TRUTH

In recent days an Emerald Magistrate has come to the villages around Nazo Mori. Seppun Jinpachi is an honorable man, determined to establish a stronger presence of law and Imperial order around the forest. He has quelled several arguments between local samurai, made sure all villages have sufficient funds for repairs of their houses before the next winter, and begun recruiting more doshin to patrol the roads. His efforts are still in their infancy, but already the peasants feel a bit more secure, happy that a member of the Imperial families has taken interest in their insignificant region of the Empire.

However, Jinpachi has also begun inquiring about the scholars who have visited the forest in the past, discreetly but methodically gathering information about the ruins. Rumor claims he is looking for a group of brave samurai to accompany him on an expedition into the forest to solve the mystery of the ruins once and for all. Although the locals have respectfully cautioned him against this course of action, it is clear Jinpachi will not be denied. Whatever it takes, he will get down to the truth of the matter.

It is ironic, then, that so much about Jinpachi himself is a lie.

Jinpachi is a true member of the Seppun family, but unlike most of them he has never felt an unerring devotion to the Throne. He respects the Emperor but has always felt the Son of Heaven to be disappointingly... human. He never voices those feelings aloud, but nonetheless his beliefs drew the attention of certain people. Soon, Jinpachi was recruited by the Kolat. The organization has trained him to deal with supernatural threats such as the Shadowlands and the Lying Darkness, and this duty has brought him to Nazo Mori. His superiors in the Kolat want to assess the threat from whatever hides in the forest; they feel uncomfortable not knowing anything about it. Although he plans to make sure he is accompanied by talented samurai when he finally goes into the forest, Jinpachi will not hesitate to sacrifice them to learn the truth and to make sure he survives. After all, while other samurai serve the Empire the best they can, no one can serve quite the way Jinpachi does.

SEPPUN JINPACHI, SEEKER OF TRUTH

AIR: 3	EARTH: 3	FIRE: 4	WATER: 3	VOID: 3
WILLPOWER: 4				
Honor: 4.2		Status: 4.9		Glory: 5.6

School/Rank: Seppun Guardsman 5/Emerald Magistrate

Skills: Athletics 3, Battle 2, Courtier 3, Defense 5, Etiquette 4, Horsemanship 4, Iaijutsu 5, Investigation (Notice) 5, Jiu-jutsu 2, Kenjutsu (katana) 6, Kyujutsu 4, Lore: Kolat 3, Lore: Law 4, Lore: Lying Darkness 3, Lore: Shadowlands 4, Sincerity (Deceit) 5, Stealth 1

Advantages: Clear Thinker, Forbidden Knowledge (Kolat), Perceived Honor (2 ranks), Read Lips

Disadvantage: Dark Secret (Kolat), Insensitive

Kata: Striking as Air, Striking as Earth





MASATAKA, SEEKER OF POWER

Many samurai picture ronin as nothing more than bandit scum, born and bred to a life of crime and debauchery. They see men like Masataka and imagine them to be inherently flawed, driven to their lives by weakness of character. Masataka does little to dismiss those impressions – if he even cares enough to listen to them – but he knows the truth is more complicated.

Born to two ronin parents, Masataka never knew what it meant to have a clan, a lord, or a family name. His parents trained him from an early age, knowing he would need skill more than affection. As soon as he could hold a blade, Masataka offered his services as a mercenary to anybody who would pay him. He served several tours of duty in the Lion army, was a yojimbo to a Scorpion courtier, and lived for five years among the warriors of the Crab Clan on the Kaiu Wall. He fought all sorts of enemies, weak and powerful, human and not. He joined several famous ronin companies along the way, sometimes for just a few weeks, sometimes for years. His reputation was as a reliable, skilled mercenary, and although he was never offered fealty, he could usually count on a certain level of material comfort. But as his hair started to turn gray, Masataka found himself wondering what it had all been for. Other samurai could find satisfaction in the honor and glory they won by serving their clan, but all he had obtained was the money he needed to eat, maintain his weapons and armor, and lodge himself. No one would care or even notice once he passed away. Realizing this, Masataka decided to do away with the rules which had guided his life up this point... and create his own empire.

Recruiting the first few men was easy. He had connections in ronin circles across Rokugan, and he knew which men would be interested in what he had to offer. With men at his side, Masataka established his own racketeering and smuggling network, avoiding the largest

cities of the Empire so as not to attract too much attention. He was tremendously successful and continued recruiting followers from other mercenary groups, making sure they were well-trained, disciplined, and loyal. Before long, Masataka had more money than he had ever dreamed of... but money was only a means to an end, and what Masataka really wanted was power. He singled out smaller rival cartels and eliminated them, often leading the raids against them personally. He added their assets to his, and soon other criminal organizations started coming to him, offering their fealty in exchange for safety. Masataka used the money to buy off influential clan samurai, extending his network of influence even more.

Now, Masataka has set his eyes on Nazo Mori. He intends to make the forest into the base of his operations, using the superstitious fear of the locals as a way to hide himself from the Empire's scrutiny. He has personally visited the region a few times, and some of his most trusted lieutenants have settled in the villages nearby, posing as simple ronin. Once he has secured his hold on the region, Masataka believes he will be very difficult to uproot – a man who once fought for others, but no more.

MASATAKA, SEEKER OF POWER

AIR: 3	EARTH: 5	FIRE: 3	WATER: 4	VOID: 3
REFLEXES: 4	AGILITY: 4			
Honor: 3.1	Status: 0.0	Glory: 5.8	Infamy: 4.6	

School/Rank: Forest Killers (Insight Rank 5)

Skills: Athletics 4, Battle (Mass Battle) 5, Defense 5, Etiquette 1, Heavy Weapons 4, Hunting 4, Intimidation 5, Investigation 5, Jiu-jitsu 5, Kenjutsu (Katana) 6, Kyujutsu 4, Lore: Bushido 1, Lore: Shadowlands 1, Lore: Underworld 4, Stealth 4

Advantages: Crab Hands, Strength of the Earth, Tactician
Disadvantages: Obtuse, Social Disadvantage (Ronin)

Kata: Striking as Earth, Striking as Water

MORITO KATSURU, SEEKER OF JUSTICE

Being a member of a Minor Clan has many disadvantages: Lack of resources. Fewer comrades to rely on. Disrespect from other samurai. But in Morito Katsuru's mind, it also has a lot of advantages: Greater freedom. Fewer people relying on you. Being underestimated by others. Few samurai ever take notice of him as he travels around the Empire with his budoka, Nozomu.

The two men have a well-tested method which they use each time they arrive in a new town. Nozomu



uses his status as a heimin to discreetly inquire about local criminal establishments, such as gambling houses or opium dens. Meanwhile, Katsuru keeps a low profile but carefully takes note of the local magistrates to see if they are corrupt, complacent, or trustworthy. Once they have identified some of the key players in the local underworld, Katsuru and Nozomu will start harassing them, intercepting smuggling shipments and eliminating henchmen one by one. Once the criminals are rattled enough to mount a counterattack, Katsuru and Nozomu disappear... but not before contacting the reliable local magistrates. The magistrates usually have no problem finishing off the criminals; meanwhile, Katsuru and Nozomu are already far away, their names forgotten. And if some of the money they intercepted stays with them, no one ever notices.

Those who learn of Katsuru's methods might judge him as little more than a troublemaker or even a petty thief, but he actually cares deeply about justice. He has seen many times when men and women, samurai or not, took advantage of their power to abuse others. The very thought angers him, but as he is only one man with limited resources, he sticks to his proven methods rather than going on a personal crusade which would surely end with his quick death.

After hearing of Nazo Mori, Katsuru moved in and began to investigate the area. Although on the surface there seems to be little criminal activity in the nearby villages, some of the stories Katsuru hears remind him of a group of bandits he encountered in the past. They used ronin shugenja skilled in the art of creating illusions, terrorizing the local population and using their superstitions against them to cover their crimes – murder and thievery. Katsuru was confident they were defeated... but the legends of Nazo Mori are so similar to the ones he heard before. If he finds the same group acting here, this time he may have no choice but to finish things himself. Although he has only Nozomu as his ally, Katsuru knows he cannot afford to give the criminals another chance to escape and repeat their plan anywhere else. Thankfully, his trusted budoka has grown quite skilled and can handle himself in a fight, so if it comes down to it, Katsuru is sure the two of them will cause quite a lot of damage before they die. That may have to be enough.

MORITO KATSURU, SEEKER OF JUSTICE

AIR: 3	EARTH: 3	FIRE: 3	WATER: 2	VOID: 3
STAMINA: 4		AGILITY: 4	STRENGTH: 3	
Honor: 3.2		Status: 1.0	Glory: 3.0	

School/Rank: Morito Bushi 3

Skills: Athletics 4, Commerce 3, Defense 4, Horsemanship 4, Hunting (Tracking) 5, Intimidation 4, Investigation 3, Jiu-jitsu 2, Kenjutsu 5, Lore: Kolat 1, Lore: Underworld 5

Advantages: Bland, Higher Purpose (destroy criminal organizations), Servant (budoka)

Disadvantages: Seven Fortunes' Curse (Benten)

Kata: Striking as Air



IK'KIR, SEEKER OF YESTERDAY

As a proper Nezumi, Ik'kir fears many things. He fears hunger. He fears the sharp blades humans wield when angry. He fears Tomorrow. But he does not fear forests. He grew up in a forest with his packmates of the Tattered Ear Tribe, probably the largest tribe ever to exist. Humans fear forests because they do not know what hides in them... but in most cases, what was actually hidden in them was Ik'kir and the rest of his tribe. He does not fear humans, who he knows can be talked to – as long as their blades have not been drawn out. And, most of all, he does not fear Yesterday.

As a young Nezumi, Ik'kir always loved listening to the tales of the Rememberers, who knew the history of his people since the Terrible Day and even a little bit about the times before that. Although the Tattered Ear lived more comfortably than most tribes, there were still days with hunger. Days when the cold threatened to take away the young ones. Days when angry humans would wave their blades at the Nezumi, accusing them of crimes real and imagined. During those bad days, Ik'kir listened even more to the tales of Yesterday, of a powerful Nezumi Empire which had been safe and prosperous. And Ik'kir dreamed. He dreamed of finding Yesterday, of discovering the key to restoring the Nezumi to greatness, of escaping pain and suffering forever. It was a foolish dream, he knew, but for a Nezumi dreams are their own kind of reality. And then he grew up and became a Shaman, one whose Name was so strong he could influence reality itself. If he became powerful enough, if his Name was great enough, maybe one day he could bring Yesterday back to life.

With that in mind, Ik'kir gathered his few belongings, said a sad goodbye to his pack, and left the confines of his own forest. Luckily for him, the Tattered Ear had a good knowledge of human customs; otherwise, he would have probably have died at human hands in the first few weeks. Humans are a source of frustration for Ik'kir, for they offer knowledge and danger in equal amounts. Ik'kir lived off the land and used his magic to survive on his



own, traveling across the land and occasionally meeting other Nezumi tribes. His quest became almost legendary among other Nezumi, making his Name even stronger, and while many seasons have passed since he left home he cannot bring himself to give up just yet.

When Ik'kir first heard about Nazo Mori, hope surged within his heart. He believes the ruins in the forest might have belonged to the Nezumi Empire of Yesterday, and the strange beings spotted by humans could be living memories of Nezumi now long gone. He has skulked around the forest and villages for the past few weeks, eager to go inside the forest but also not wanting to rush heedless into danger. A few villagers have spotted him, but Ik'kir has made sure he does not pose a threat, even gifting a few seeds and tools to the poorest peasants to encourage them to see him as a friendly spirit. He has been more cautious with samurai, but would love to find some allies among them before venturing into the forest. Ik'kir conducts most of his investigations during the night, and in the day he sleeps in a small burrow he has made for himself, a good distance from the forest. And he dreams, ever so vividly, of a brighter Yesterday. Maybe soon he will get to see it while awake as well.

IK'KIR, SEEKER OF YESTERDAY

AIR: 3 EARTH: 3 FIRE: 2 WATER: 2 NAME: 4

INTELLIGENCE: 3 PERCEPTION: 3

Niche: 5.6

School/Rank: Nezumi Shaman 3

Skills: Athletics 3, Defense 4, Etiquette 1, Hunting (Survival) 4, Investigation 3, Jiu-jitsu 3, Lore: Shadowlands 3, Lore: Spirit Realms (Yume-do) 5, Meditation 5, Perform: Nezumi Dance 5, Stealth 5

Advantages: Higher Purpose (Find Yesterday), Namebound (Conjure Earth's Bounty, Conjure Perfect Self, Bonds of Blood)

Spells: Conjure Earth's Bounty, Mend Name, Smite the Nameless, Burn Name, Conjure Perfect Self, Name Talent, Bonds of Blood, Conjure Thoughts, Curse of No-Lips

GENJIRO, SEEKER OF FORTUNES

"Many dedicate their whole life to a single Fortune. But the beauty of the Celestial Order is that every single Fortune, great and small, is dedicated to the same order that mankind belongs to. So in a very real way, a thousand gods pay close attention to your life every single day. Isn't it just fair, then, to thank every single one of them?"

These words from the abbot marked Genjiro from an early age. Although all in the Empire pray to the Seven Great Fortunes, and many pray to popular lesser Fortunes such as Osano-Wo or Inari, there are so many other Fortunes that most people never know about. During his apprenticeship Genjiro would often stay up late at night, trying to learn the names of all the Fortunes. Hujokuko, Fortune of Fertility. Kyufoki, Fortune of Earthquakes. Uzume, Fortune of Dancing. By the time he was formally accepted into the Temple of the Thousand Fortunes, Genjiro already knew the names of dozens and dozens of Fortunes... but this was not enough to satisfy him. He departed from the monastery and started roaming the Empire, stopping at every single temple along the way, learning about the Fortunes each one served and how to properly pay them respect. It was a simple life but a deeply rewarding one, and Genjiro's great knowledge of Heavenly beings made him a welcome guest wherever he went. He even traveled to a small shrine in the lands of the Phoenix Clan to learn about the Lost Fortunes, those poor souls elevated by Hantei XVI to unsavory positions such as the Fortune of Dung and the Fortune of Torture. Even to those Genjiro paid his respect, for he knew they had their role to play in the Celestial Order just like everything else in the world.

But although learning about and serving the Fortunes filled him with joy, Genjiro soon realized there was a darker side to this knowledge. In the dark forgotten corners of the Empire's libraries he found stories which sent a chill down his spine. Stories of forgotten Fortunes, corrupted Fortunes, even destroyed Fortunes. Although the Celestial Order reigned supreme, it seemed even the most powerful beings in the universe were not immune to the cycle of birth and destruction. Those stories he mostly kept to himself, for if they shook his faith they might break



the beliefs of a less pious person. Whenever he learned of such broken beings, Genjiro said what prayers he could to appease their souls.

When he heard about Nazo Mori, a familiar concern gripped Genjiro's heart. The stories and superstitions have all the symptoms of a maddened Fortune. Genjiro has theorized it could be the local Fortune of the forest, or a more powerful forest Fortune may have made its home here. He has recently approached the villages to offer solace and guidance to their inhabitants – while also collecting information on the local legends. Although he does not relish the thought, Genjiro may enter the forest if he feels it is the only option. After all, what is his life worth when compared to the torment of a Celestial being? Whatever the cause of the Fortune's torment, he will need to put an end to it.

GENJIRO, SEEKER OF FORTUNES

AIR: 3 EARTH: 3 FIRE: 3 WATER: 3 VOID: 3

WILLPOWER: 4 INTELLIGENCE: 4

Honor: 4.7

Status: 0.0

Glory: 2.3

School/Rank: Temple of the Thousand Fortunes Monk 3

Skills: Athletics 5, Courtier 1, Defense 5, Etiquette 2, Investigation 5, Jiu-jitsu 5, Lore: History 5, Lore: Omens 5, Lore: Theology (fortunes) 7, Meditation 5, Sincerity 1

Advantages: Seven Fortunes' Blessing (Fukurokujin – Lore: Theology), Sage

Disadvantages: Ascetic, Fascination (Fortunes)

Kiho: Banish all Shadows, Chi Protection, Dance of the Flames, Destiny's Strike, Earthen Fist, Eight Directions Awareness, Harmony of the Mind, The Body Is an Anvil

A Campaign for Nazo Mori: Madness of the Stars

"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear. The oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."
– Anonymous

Madness of the Stars is a campaign for the Nazo Mori setting, but could easily be utilized elsewhere. The setting itself is less dominant than the themes represented. Madness of the Stars is intended to play out as mystery and suspense. Depending on the desires of the GM and players, the story can resolve with a big reveal or it can spiral further and further into the unknown darkness of calamity and despair. It is a tale of loss, of fear of the unknown, of Void-inspired madness, and of the depths of moral despair.

This campaign leans towards specific ideas about what might lie within the forest of Nazo Mori, but it does not make an irrevocable decision for the GM. In this tale the forest is home to an ancient "other," a creature of horror and malicious power utterly foreign to the ways



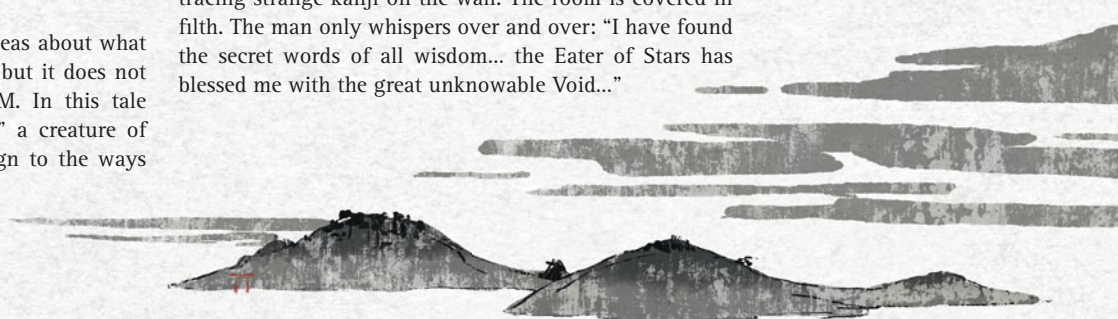
of mankind. A dark intelligence seeking to spread its influence. However, GMs should feel free to modify the particulars to their own taste.

Act One: Madness Rides the Wind

The story can take place during any season and (with minor modifications) in any land or timeline of your choosing. The isolation and the inherent fear of hunger and cold that characterize the winter make that season particularly appropriate. However, as long as you remember to focus the story's heart on the mystery of Nazo Mori – on fear of the unknown and the subsequent paranoia – everything else will fit in. If you already have a valid reason for your players to be near Nazo Mori, one of the PCs can receive notice from home of the ciphered letter (see below); otherwise, the letter serves as the catalyst to send the PCs to Nazo Mori.

THE CIPHERED LETTER

A mysterious and inexplicably ciphered letter is delivered to a prominent courtier in the PCs' homeland, having apparently come from the Nazo Mori region. Days later, other letters are discovered by other samurai, all with the same mysterious script. Then the insanity begins. The first recipient is found in his garden, eyes pierced with his own chopsticks, his tongue chewed off. The second walks out of her home and into her stable, taking no gear or food, and is last seen driving her horse madly in the direction of the Burning Sands. The most recent individual, a personal ally of the PCs' daimyo, locks himself in his rooms for weeks, refusing all but the most basic of necessities. Finally the lord orders the doors forced, and they find the man slumped in the corner of his room, one hand limply tracing strange kanji on the wall. The room is covered in filth. The man only whispers over and over: "I have found the secret words of all wisdom... the Eater of Stars has blessed me with the great unknowable Void..."





MECHANICS OF THE FOREST

The following mechanics are suggested specifically for use in this campaign, although the GM can easily use them for any other game set in the area of Nazo Mori.

Whatever the nature of the mystery at the heart of the forest, one overarching emotion dominates the lives of the people who live there: paranoia. Those who reside within sight of Nazo Mori for more than a month begin to suffer the ill effects of living in proximity to an alien mystery. This manifests as an increased mental instability and feeds off any inherent weakness the character might possess.

Any such individual must make a Willpower Roll, TN 15. (The TN increases by +5 each subsequent month.) When the roll is failed for the first time, the victim gains Phobia: Nazo Mori (1 point). Each subsequent failed roll exacerbates the situation in new and interesting ways. For example, an existing Mental Disadvantage that involves a roll to resist behavior (Brash, Compulsion, Lechery, etc.) might have its TN permanently increased by +5. Alternatively, the Phobia of Nazo Mori will increase in point value, or the character may acquire a new Mental Disadvantage chosen by the GM.

Unfortunately for the victims, distance from Nazo Mori does not seem to abate these new penalties.



These letters are actually the result of a cursed Kaidanshu called Whispers of the Stars (described at the end of this section). In most games, the daimyo will simply send some emissaries (the PCs) to Nazo Mori to investigate the source of the sinister letters. The GM may add more motivations and reasons, as follows:

- The PCs may be magistrates or yoriki assigned to the investigation, charged with discovering what dark magic wrought this havoc.
- One of the NPCs killed by the letters may have been a personal ally, friend, lover, or family member of the PCs or their daimyo.
- A high ranking scholar specializing in esoteric knowledge (or in Nazo Mori itself) discovers the letter incidents and seeks further information. He or she is unable to travel to Nazo Mori in person, perhaps constrained by duty or physical malady, so the PCs are sent instead.
- Finally and most creatively, perhaps one of the PCs received one of the mysterious letters. Its power has begun to take its toll, scourging the PC with paranoia and developing madness. In this case, treat the PC as having “heard” the tale of Whispers of the Stars, though depending on your timeline, you may wish to partially or temporarily delay the effects.

INVESTIGATING

Once the characters reach the Nazo Mori region and begin their investigation, the GM should have them meet whichever NPCs are present in this campaign, either from the list earlier in this chapter or of the GM's own design. The characters should begin to understand the basic attitudes and motivations of each of the major villages and their residents, and experience the paranoia and hostility emanating like heat waves from the villagers and the local samurai. A subtle but powerful feeling of being unwelcome should set in, and the PCs should feel as though getting even the barest hint of a clue is like pulling teeth.

The players may feel frustrated at a lack of progress, and the GM can liven things up with side-scenarios (such as some of the Challenge / Focus / Strike ideas later in this chapter). Eventually, however, the PCs should be able to unearth a disturbing pattern in local events. Dozens of violent crimes and disappearances have occurred in the past few months, accelerating a trend which has been going on for years. The recent increase in these activities directly coincides with rumors of a strange woman seen wandering the boundaries of the forest. (This is Tsunagari, the main foe for this campaign. See the Antagonist section later for details on her.)

The PCs should gradually discover that most of the horrific acts were not entirely unexpected. For example, a man known for being unfaithful to his wife suddenly began openly carousing with his mistress in public; his wife killed herself in shame. A heimin already known for his thuggish nature suddenly beat two other men to death over an argument about the moon. Each man was said to later come to his senses, only to run off and disappear into the woods of Nazo Mori.

Throughout their investigations, the PCs should keep hearing odd snippets that reflect the influence of the cursed Kaidanshu. A villager might speak unusual words, then when asked for an explanation reply, “The whispers of the stars speak to me as I lie awake at night.” Another



villager might offer a series of nonsense sayings that he believes to be profound wisdom. These sorts of hints should grow in frequency and the PCs should get the sense that something is spreading through the villages.

RAISING THE PARANOIA

The GM should gradually ramp up the tension and danger to the PCs' investigations as they progress. The villagers are deeply perturbed at strange samurai stirring up the unquiet spirits of the forest, and consider the crimes and disappearances which the PCs find so disturbing to be "normal," so they will try to obstruct or sabotage the PCs' investigations, even threatening their fellow peasants into silence. Interactions between samurai and heimin, native and outsider, should be strained to the maximum and any time the peasants gather in a group there should be an ominous sense of a murderous mob about to erupt.

Another way to facilitate this sense of paranoia is for the PCs to begin experiencing strange dreams in which they share in the secret sins and hubris of others. They may find themselves becoming aware of Dark Secrets or other shameful aspects of their fellow PCs. The dreams always include an encounter near Nazo Mori's edge, with the dreamer experiencing firsthand the terror emanating from that place.

Act Two: Revelation Through Action

During the early hours of the morning, when at least two of the PCs are performing their morning rituals, each of them is separately visited by a mysterious stranger: Tsunagari, the Voice of the Stars. She could approach a character as he performs his kata, or meditates, or takes a morning meal. Regardless, the GM should make sure Tsunagari appears to at least two characters in two separate locations. The GM can run the scenes back to back, but a more interesting approach is to shift back and forth between each character throughout the scenes, like cross-cutting in a movie.

Tsunagari is here to gauge her opposition. She knows on some deep level that the PCs want to prevent her from sharing the "wisdom" of her master. She is pleasant, calm, and enigmatic, while using her Void magic to discern as much as possible about each target (in game terms, using her Void spells to learn Advantages, Disadvantages, Traits, and Skills). She is able to appear in two locations at once by using the Void spell *Divide the Soul*, and the GM can hint at this by having her respond to the two characters out of sync (e.g. when one PC asks her a question, she responds to the other instead). If a PC tries to attack or follow Tsunagari, she will utilize her magic to hide or disguise herself and flee – she is not interested in a lethal conflict at this time. However, the GM can promote the idea of her as a dangerous opponent by having her drain a PC of Void Points with her spells. (Of course, the GM should also remember the effects of her Inner Gift when she casts anything.) Finally and most importantly, at some point during each scene she will share with each PC the

cursed Kaidanshu, the Whispers of the Stars. This is her purpose, the motive of her madness: to share what she calls "the wisdom of the Eater of Stars."

PEASANT VIOLENCE

Soon after the visit from Tsunagari, some of the peasants will finally be driven by their paranoia into taking violent action against the PCs. This will happen in whichever village the PCs have been visiting the most (or currently reside in). A servant will lure one of the PCs away by suggesting he can offer secret information if they meet secretly. Of course, the GM should grant the PC the opportunity to detect false motivations (a good roll is Investigation / Awareness), although the villagers will have sent their best liar, so the TN should be fairly tough (at least 25, and probably 30+).

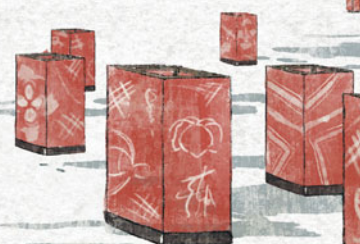
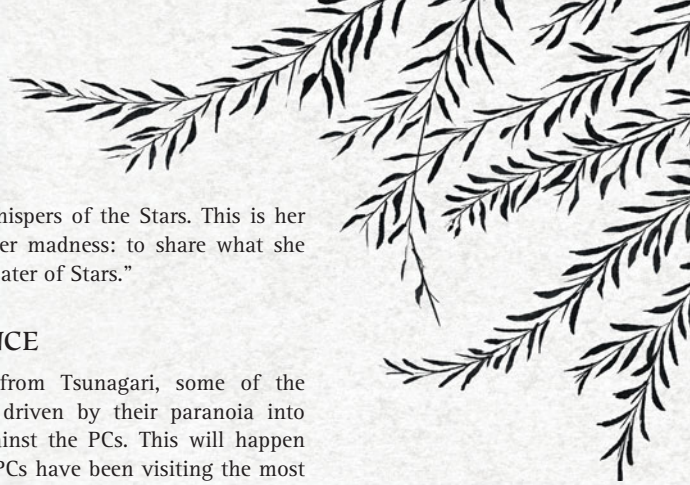
If the peasants succeed in luring the character far enough away from the others for rescue to be slow in coming, they will launch an ambush. The lying servant will show the PC a mysterious scroll – he or she unfurls it, then suddenly tosses dust or sand into the PC's eyes when he tries to read it. Then a sizeable group of ashigaru leaps out from hiding and attacks, using peasant weapons and improvised items, trying to kill the PC as quickly and quietly as possible. One of the peasants will snarl that this is "for disturbing the perfect silence of the forest."

After the incident, questioning (or torturing) any survivors will reveal they are motivated by an absolute terror toward the forest – they are more frightened by the dark unknown than the very real threat of samurai with blades. Regardless, the characters will have to decide how to proceed. Punishing the peasants as a whole is a possibility, but will likely result in a violent revolt. On the other hand, letting the ambush survivors get away with their actions might spark similar troubles. The challenge of what to do with the peasants will not depart, in fact only spreading as rumors of the ambush and paranoia about the meddlesome PCs reach far and wide.

THE HIGOSHA NAZO SPEAK UP

Either during or after the resolution of the peasant ambush, two strange men will approach the PCs and offer their help and insight into the problems.

These men are a part of a hidden otokodate calling itself the Higosha Nazo. They have been watching the characters and have decided to offer their aid. The Higosha Nazo have been hiding among the villagers for years (see their description later), but have only recently begun to experience the rampant paranoia so prevalent among the peasants. The GM can use them as a way of providing background on the other residents of the villages, the history of the various scholars who were broken by their experiences in the forest, and the legends of Nazo Mori itself. Ultimately, the Higosha Nazo desire one thing: to prevent the Whispers of the Stars from spreading any further, especially beyond the bounds of the forest. Depending on how the PCs relate with the Higosha Nazo, ronin PCs might be able to join the otokodate.





The GM may also wish to keep confronting the PCs with other problems, perhaps using the other Challenge / Focus / Strike adventure seeds listed in this chapter, or coming up with new ideas based on the GM's campaign or the PCs' own backgrounds. Regardless, it should feel like problem after problem comes at the PCs, relentlessly and without letup. Once the characters are all but tearing their hair out in frustration and confusion, two things occur to spur the story: a death and a letter.

A DEATH AND A LETTER

A villager emerges from the boundaries of the forest and runs into the middle of the town, screaming and gibbering incoherently. He finally stammers out that a trio of vicious lions has appeared in the forest. When the PCs arrive, they see three massive beasts at the treeline, roaring ferociously. Here, the GM has a choice. The lions can be seen as connected to the Kitsu scholar who was lost years ago in Nazo Mori, but their current intent can be altered to suit the GM's desire. Perhaps the Kitsu has come out of hiding in order to frighten off the villagers and prevent further investigation into the wood, or perhaps the trio of lions are willing agents of whatever entity the Voice of the Stars truly serves. Either way, if the PCs approach, the lions will attack (either to ward off or to kill).

Soon after this incident, the PCs receive a letter from their lord. It is aged and damaged by rain and wear, and its wandering kanji display confusion or perhaps even madness in the author. However, the actual contents are equally disturbing. There is talk of sending the PCs reinforcements and demands for them to hurry their investigation along. Eventually (perhaps with the help of an Investigation roll) the PCs realize the letter was sent months ago. The PCs think they have been at the boundary of Nazo Mori for only a few days, but if the letter is true, they have lost weeks upon weeks of time.

Act Three: Battle Within and Without

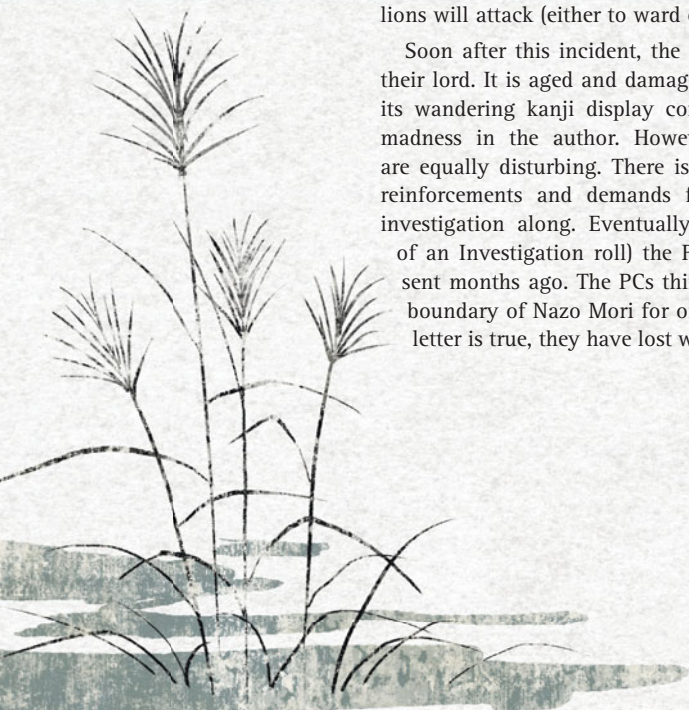
The GM should be playing up the sense of paranoia more and more, as well as increasing the difficulty of resisting any Mental Disadvantages. Characters with Brash find themselves constantly angry beyond all reason. Overconfident characters find themselves demanding answers and ignoring the consequences of further angering the peasants. The PCs should feel frayed and at the ragged edge of a fight or flight response.

In this third Act of the campaign, the PCs must make a decision: will they depart Nazo Mori in failure, perhaps trying to return later with reinforcements? Or will they venture into the dark wood in an attempt to solve the problem?

If the PCs choose to leave the village, there should be associated penalties of Honor and Glory, perhaps even a touch of Infamy for cowardice and abandonment of duty. However, this should not necessarily end the adventure; any PCs who have experienced visions will find they continue to grow in magnitude. They will feel sure the so-called Voice of the Stars is not stopped and the madness spread by her Whispers may spread further and become permanent. The PCs may be the last and only chance to stop a plague of madness from spreading throughout the entire Empire. Moreover, their tales of terror and madness will be difficult to prove and may cause them to appear insane themselves, so gaining reinforcements or greater support could prove challenging. On the other hand, if the players clearly did not enjoy the scenario, the GM can simply let them walk away and leave the mystery of Nazo Mori unsolved.

Should the players instead choose to delve into the woods, however, the story will ramp up toward its climax. The moment they make this decision, the influence of the cursed Kaidanshu dramatically increases. The villagers who were on edge about the characters will now either flee on sight or gather and attack in a crazed mob. The Higoshas Nazo have their hands full trying to keep any sort of peace in the villages and are no longer able to aid in the investigation. Any notable NPCs will feel the intensified aura as well – some may still try to help the PCs, some may flee, and others will fall prey to their own weaknesses and act out in a wild fashion. At the GM's option, some of them may go into the forest and become pawns of the Voice of the Stars and her master.

The GM should tailor the events to the style of play the players favor. If most of the PCs are bushi or otherwise martially-minded individuals, the GM can throw mad mobs, insane NPCs, mind-altered beasts of Nazo Mori, and other such physical challenges their way. If the PCs prefer intrigue, allow some of the difficulties to be resolved by emotional manipulation or by understanding an NPC or villager's past. If the PCs enjoy Shadowlands adventures, the GM can easily escalate the situation into a horror scenario with madness at its heart. In all cases, the goal is to rattle the PCs, and the GM should not hesitate to "poke" at their psychological weak points. A PC might find



himself seeing a Sworn Enemy every time he rounds a corner, each time turning out to be a trick of the mind. A Frail Mind may find himself unable to maintain sanity, a shugenja-ko with Soft-Hearted is forced to kill rampaging peasants, and so forth. Now is the perfect time to showcase all Disadvantages to the fullest – not to “punish” the players for their choices, but to remind them that all choices have consequences.

CONFRONTING THE HEART OF NAZO MORI

Eventually, regardless of what gauntlets they must run, the PCs will enter Nazo Mori to seek out Tsunagari and try to solve the problem. In response, the mad ishiken and her “master” assault the characters where they are most vulnerable: within their minds. This culminating scene is a battle, but one like no other the PCs have experienced – a literal “battle of the mind.” This is an unusual approach, inspired by this book’s themes of Void and the enigmatic world of Nazo Mori. Depending on the GM’s style of play, this approach may not work; if so, the GM can choose instead to remove the surreal and psychological elements and present a more straightforward physical challenge of a battle with Tsunagari. However, if the GM does embrace the “battle of the mind” the climax of this campaign is limited only by imagination.

Tsunagari has tapped into the eldritch power at the heart of Nazo Mori – what she sometimes calls the Eater of Stars and sometimes simply, “the Master.” Coupled with her own unstable grasp of Void magic and the influence of the cursed Kaidanshu Whispers of the Stars, Tsunagari has found a way to invade the minds of her enemies. She uses this power to trap the PCs within their own minds and then battles them in the unknowable realm of the Void.

It should be noted that the “battle of the mind” should seem even more frightening and bewildering to samurai than to Western characters. After all, samurai always keep their minds closed off and maintain their On (face). By forcing the PCs to share in each other’s worst emotional flaws, Tsunagari’s attack exposes the raw nerves of samurai culture. Friends and enemies alike will share a cosmic connection never experienced before or after. Revealing one’s inner weakness is an exposure of tremendous magnitude, but can also forge new cosmic connections between souls – the GM may wish to consider giving the PCs the opportunity to purchase 1-point Kharmic Ties to each other if their role-play justifies it. Conversely, PCs who are enemies might strengthen that enmity into becoming each others’ Sworn Enemy.

Mechanically, this battle of the mind is still a “skirmish,” but it should be tailored to the GM’s campaign and players. Each PC should face challenges that match his or her background and personal weaknesses, playing off things like Lost Love, Sworn Enemy, and Dark Secret. If the PCs are a militant group, the GM can confront them with duels or even resolve the whole scene as a Mass Battle. If the PCs lean more political, the GM can opt to use the Court Battle system (from the L5R 4th Edition supplement *Emerald Empire*) or simply run a series of role-playing scenes and

Contested Social Skill Rolls, with injuries accumulating as if the words are felt as Wounds.

Regardless of format, the confrontation within the mind should first pit the PCs against their own weaknesses, expressed through things like Sworn Enemies or Lost Loves, before they are able to confront Tsunagari herself. This should be a series of battles, each one tougher than the last, each bringing the PCs one step closer to the mad ishiken. Each of these should offer the characters chances to hold the spotlight and engage in compelling role-play as they face their internal demons come to life. (In fact, if the player fully engages in the scene and role-plays memorably, the GM may wish to offer the player a chance to buy off or even freely get rid of the corresponding Disadvantages.) Villains and rivals from the PCs’ play-history can return, perhaps twisted by the Void or possessing knowledge of the PCs’ memories and weaknesses. If the PCs are relatively new and inexperienced, the GM can still call on memories of families, sensei, and friends. A few examples:

- ❶ A samurai with Lechery faces off against a demonic geisha, who first seeks to manipulate him emotionally, only resorting to physical confrontation if the PC proves resistant to her wiles.
- ❷ Two characters with competing backgrounds or linked Disadvantages (such as Sworn Enemy or Jealousy) face off against each other. This may be ill-advised as a surprise, but if the GM discusses it with the players ahead of time they may welcome the opportunity for a psychic showdown. Duels, artistic competitions, physical challenges, or a basic skirmish could resolve the conflict, but the GM should make sure there are opportunities for the PCs to understand they are being manipulated to weaken one another.
- ❸ A character with Low Pain Threshold undergoes torture never before imagined, and must succeed at a series of Stamina or Willpower Rolls to resist and break free.

If the GM feels the PCs are getting bored or jaded with fighting their inner demons, he can call on the rest of Nazo Mori, adding in strange spirits or warped animals. Use creatures from Yume-Do and/or Sakkaku as templates for dream demons, or simply change the physical descriptions of basic woodland creatures, such as a stag with glowing horns of lightning. The GM can also drop in Tsunagari for a couple of Rounds at a time, letting her take pot shots at her enemies. Finally, once the characters are emotionally and physically exhausted (and probably seriously injured), Tsunagari will appear and attack directly.

Of course, given the nature of the encounter up until now, the GM should try to include glimpses into Tsunagari’s own character and her seething madness. Her own inner demons become the PCs’ nightmares, and they see what she sees. What does a mad ishiken remember and perceive? The GM should review her history (in the sidebar that follows) and bring elements of it into the encounter. Her brother, a dark memory the Eater of Stars pulls from her mind and remakes with the power of Void. Her background as Hasana, the loss of her family,



and her experience with the ancient terror at the heart of Nazo Mori. The characters witness strange glimpses of other Spirit Realms and the lost realms which live only in dreams and stories. (The GM can use the Kwaidan stories in Chapter Five of this book as inspiration for this.)

Finally, hopefully, the PCs prevail against Tsunagari. They emerge from the surreal battle of the mind and find themselves in an empty glade deep within Nazo Mori, with Tsunagari lying unconscious on the ground.

Conclusion

What the PCs do with Tsunagari's comatose form shapes how the story concludes. Defeating her in the final battle causes the cursed Kaidanshu to be weakened. However, the Whispers of the Stars are not destroyed permanently. Will killing Tsunagari cut off the link between it and the power within Nazo Mori? Perhaps the characters will have to transport her to the lands of the Isawa in order to stop the strange connection.

If the PCs insist on delving into the heart of Nazo Mori to find the ruins or the "Eater of the Stars" it is up to the GM to decide what (if anything) they discover. It may be that Tsunagari's "master" was nothing more than a warped image created by her own deformed mind. Or, perhaps it has fled rather than face the PCs on their own terms... leaving open the threat that it might return. Another possibility is that the "Eater of Stars" now needs a new Voice, and the PCs' strange final battle has created a connection to it; one of the PCs might wind up "blessed" by the Eater of Stars and afflicted with madness. (The GM can create a unique Disadvantage to represent this, or simply use a variant of Lord Moon's Curse.) This can be off-set somewhat by granting the PC some extra Experience Points that can only be used to raise the Void Ring.

The PCs must also decide how to deal with the crimes committed by the villagers, whose paranoia returns to normal levels once Tsunagari is defeated. Will the PCs punish the heimin for their actions, or show understanding of their situation? The PCs could easily turn their victory over Tsunagari into the Hero of the People Advantage, or just as easily gain the peasants' ire by punishing too severely. There are also loose ends with the local NPCs and the Higoshia Nazo.

The GM must also decide whether time was actually lost, as the letter from the PCs' daimyo suggested, or whether this was just another trick of the mind. Did the PCs spend days or weeks around the mysterious forest, or was it months, years, or even decades? Regardless, the PCs should hopefully feel as if they have undergone an ordeal of great magnitude, and how they choose to resolve the denouement could shape the future of Nazo Mori and perhaps the Empire itself.

The Antagonist: Tsunagari

Tsunagari, Voice of the Stars, is a potent but insane ishiken. She is finely dressed, blanketed in the warmth of layer upon layer of midnight black kimono embroidered with unfamiliar constellations in white thread. Her hair is like ink, spilling in an unfettered cascade across her shoulders and back. When she speaks, she does so with a conviction that shines from her eyes – but she always seems to be looking just beyond whoever she is talking to, looking at something no other can perceive.

It was not always thus. Once, a child named Hasana and her twin brother Haruko were brought to the Elder Tree near Nazo Mori. Their mother had been cast out of the Isawa for an improper relationship and their father executed; Hasana's mother wished to get as far from the Phoenix as possible, and sought guidance for the future by sleeping with her children beneath the ancient tree. Hasana awoke in the night to find her brother missing. Her mother used her magic to discover a trail... a trail leading into Nazo Mori. When she sought to follow, samurai from Laughing Plains Village barred her way, unwilling to risk arousing the danger within Nazo Mori. The frantic woman lashed out in violence, and Hasana watched from the shadows as a warrior's blow took her mother's life.

When it was safe, the young girl fled. She lived a life of starvation and beggary, drifting through the world in a numb and deadened state. As she grew older, however, a talent for the kami allowed her to earn some money and elevated her above the status of the average ronin.

One evening, the older Hasana found herself able to sense a new strangeness about the world – her mind awakening to the latent power of the Void. At the same time, visions of her lost twin brother began to appear. He was full grown, seemingly healthy and handsome, and his whispered words drew Hasana into Nazo Mori. There she discovered an entity called Hoshi no Musaboru, the Eater of Stars, which her brother referred to as "the Master." Haruko's spirit implored his sister to enter the being's service and promised it would teach her how to gain the power to return him to life. Hasana swore to serve it so long as she could still speak to Haruko. She took the new name of Tsunagari, a reference to her connection to her brother and the forest, and she became the Voice of the Stars.

Tsunagari has lost herself within the mad comfort of the twisted Void that Hoshi no Musaboru bestowed upon her. She does not consider the ramifications of her actions and jealously defends her need to maintain contact with her brother. She has committed terrible actions and atrocities in service to her Master and considers herself to be his herald. In her heart, however, the little girl called Hasana wants nothing more than to whisper songs to her long-dead brother.

TSUNAGARI, VOICE OF THE STARS

AIR: 4 EARTH: 4 FIRE: 3 WATER: 3 VOID: 6

WILLPOWER: 5 INTELLIGENCE: 4 PERCEPTION: 4

Honor: 2.7 Status: 0.5 Glory: 0.6 Infamy: 3.6

School/Rank: Self-Taught Shugenja (Insight Rank 5)

Skills: Athletics 2, Calligraphy (Cipher) 4, Defense 3, Divination (Astrology) 4, Etiquette 1, Hunting 3, Lore: Elements (Void) 4, Lore: Theology 3, Meditation (Void Recovery) 5, Polearms (Naginata) 4, Spellcraft (Importune) 6, Stealth (Spellcasting) 5

Elemental Spells: Sense, Commune, Summon, Nature's Touch, Token of Memory, Way of Deception, Hidden Visage, Mask of Wind, Earth's Stagnation, Extinguish, Path to Inner Peace

Void Spells: Boundless Sight, Drawing the Void, See Through Lies, Sense Void, Touch the Emptiness, Witness the Untold; Altering the Course, Drink of Your Essence, The Empty Voice, False Whispers, Reach Through the Void, Severed from the Stream; Echoes in the Void, Moment of Clarity, Void Release; Fill with Emptiness, Void Strike; Divide the Soul, Unbound Essence

Advantages: Inner Gift (Chaotic Void), Ishiken-Do

Disadvantages: Dark Fate (Voice of the Stars), Haunted (Haruko), Touched by the Void

Notes:

- ☉ *Tsunagari's "school" is from the L5R 4th Edition supplement Enemies of the Empire (page 205). She did not choose an Affinity or Deficiency, but retains the Technique (The Kami's Gift).*
- ☉ *All of Tsunagari's Void spells are considered to be memorized and she does not have scrolls for any of them, having learned the originals from Hoshi no Musaboru.*
- ☉ *Any creature who serves "the Master" treats Tsunagari as having a Status of 9.0*

TSUNAGARI'S INNER GIFT

This Advantage is a unique product of Tsunagari's discordant relationship to Nazo Mori and the thing she calls Hoshi no Musaboru, the Eater of Stars. The advantage grants her knowledge of Void spells, bestowed as visions or dreams. Unfortunately for Tsunagari, the blessing of the Chaotic Void also holds a terrible curse which creates a wild and unpredictable nature in each spell she learns. The GM may create unique effects to fit the scene, or simply roll on the chart for the Ofuda of the Unraveled Soul from Chapter Five of this book.



NEMURANAI: THE WHISPERS OF THE STARS

Tsunagari believes she has encountered a being from beyond the bounds of Ningen-do in the heart of Nazo Mori's ruins. She calls it the Eater of Stars, Hoshi no Musaboru. However, in reality Tsunagari has awakened a cursed *Kaidanshu*, a nemuranai of words, with her own whispers. She speaks this "ancient wisdom" to those who are willing and forces it upon others with the magic of the Void (primarily through use of the False Whispers spell). She believes the previous scholars who explored the forest were touched by Hoshi no Musaboru as well, and that Otomo Tametsu was close to spreading the tale to the Empire at large.

The *Kaidanshu* is insidious in its subtlety, at first showing no obvious signs of danger. Its words are merely a confusing array of nonsense, leaving one with a profound sense of disquietude, an unsettling of the mind. However, over time the cursed *Kaidanshu* evolves and grows stronger. An individual who hears the Whispers must immediately make an Opposed Roll of their Willpower against the speaker's Void. Failure results in the victim gaining the Disadvantages of Momoku and Phobia (suitable type, or simply the Unknown) as the words disrupt his proper connection to all things. The victim becomes aware of Nazo Mori as an inherent danger and

believes the only way to avert the dark gaze of the forest is to share the tale. As soon as the victim successfully inflicts the *Kaidanshu* on another, he loses the effects of Momoku... but the Phobia remains indefinitely.

If Tsunagari is not stopped, the Whispers will magnify their power by forcing the victims to continually repeat and spread the tale. Failure to do so at least once a month brings back the Momoku disadvantage and can potentially gift the victim with another new Phobia. Conversely, if Tsunagari is defeated, the GM should consider permanently removing the effects of the Whispers on PCs (unless the players are comfortable with their characters continuing to battle mental instability).

THE HIGOSHA NAZO (GUARDIANS OF THE MYSTERY)

The self-proclaimed Guardians of the Mystery do not even remember what distant purpose they once served. Rumor has it that they were once an elite unit of Imperial Legionnaires, or perhaps a personal guard stationed here after Otomo Tametsu's final incident at court. They were sent to investigate the forest and their commanders fell to the same perils of Nazo Mori that beset the scholars. Leaderless, the remainder chose to continue to fulfill their oath in secret, vowing not to allow the perversion of this land to spread. They became ronin, hid among the



villagers, and within a generation they were something completely different from what they had been.

The Higosha Nazo live mundane individual lives as peasants, but meet on occasion to share news of their home villages and to report the latest rumors about the forest. They seek at all costs to prevent others from venturing into the heart of Nazo Mori, and sometimes exploit the superstitions of the heimin to assist in that task.

Adventure Seeds: The Game of One Hundred Tales

The following section contains an array of short adventure ideas, using the standard Challenge / Focus / Strike format from previous L5R books. As always, the Challenge introduces the basic situation, the Focus adds details or complications, and the Strike points toward a climax/conclusion. However, this section is also designed as a tribute to the monk Kaideo's famous work collecting Kwaidan stories, and to the game which may (or may not) be derived from that book.

"The Game of One Hundred Candles" (or simply "The Game") originated in lengthy court gatherings as a way to stave off boredom. It is used both as a way to entertain and as a sort of test of courage for the participants. The rising terror that builds in the heart after hours of telling ghost stories in near-darkness can overwhelm even the most stalwart spirit. In one account from Kakita Ryoku's novel *Winter*, Asako Otogi's yojimbo was the last to recite a tale. As he reached out a hand to extinguish the last candle, the entire court cried out in horror – for above the Shiba a shadowy claw reached down in attack. The yojimbo spun and drew his sword, reacting without thought, and his swift action revealed the "hand" to be nothing more than the shadow of a spider on the candle.

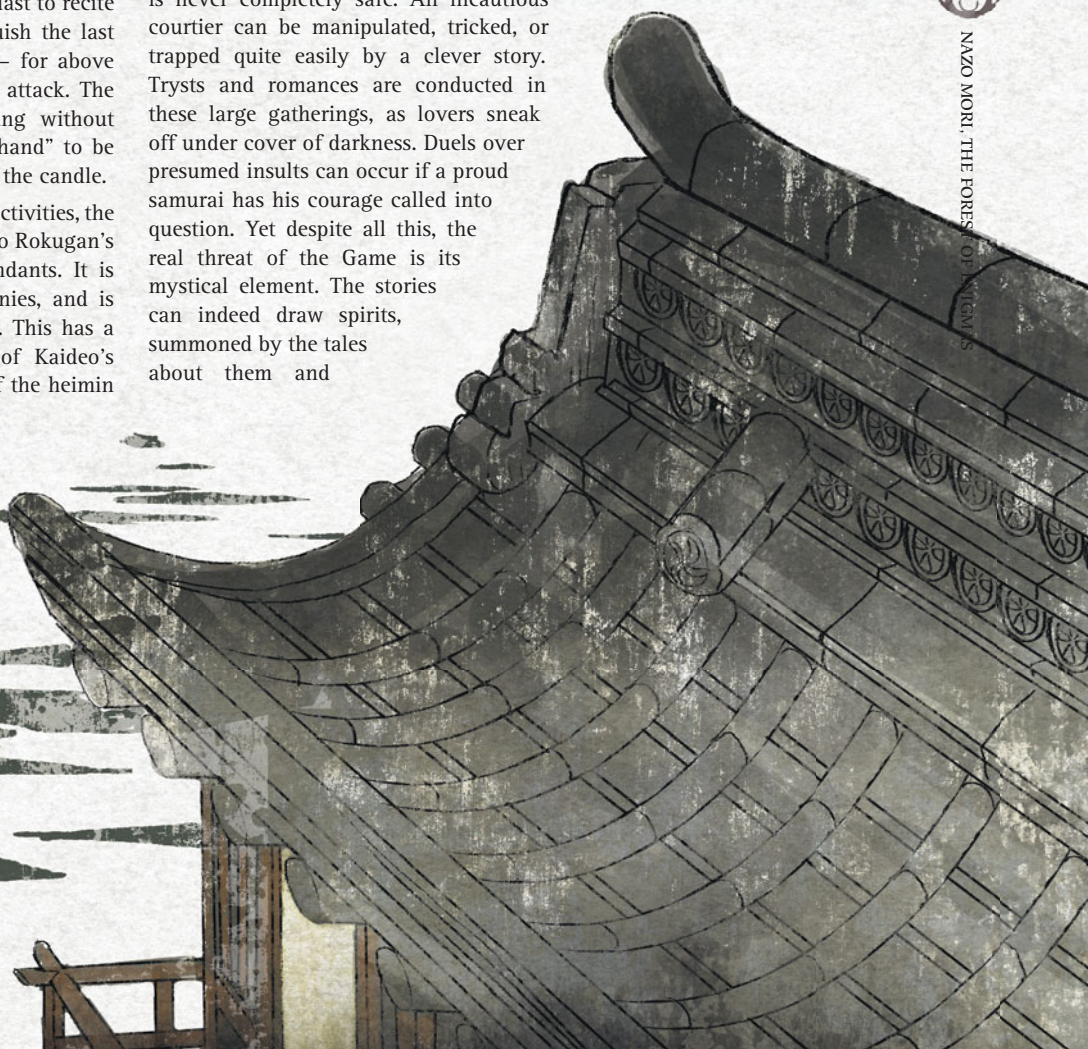
As with a number of other court games and activities, the Game of One Hundred Candles has filtered into Rokugan's wider culture via heimin servants and attendants. It is popular during festivals and village ceremonies, and is a staple in the Floating World of the geisha. This has a certain ironic symmetry given that most of Kaideo's famous stories originated with the folklore of the heimin and hinin.

The traditional Game of One Hundred Stories is played by the simplest of rules: one hundred candles (called *andon*) are set in a room with a polished surface, if possible a mirror. The *andon* are little candles located inside lanterns of paper or carved wood (or more rarely, metal). An

adjoining room separates guests from the *andon* but lets the light through. In the third and final room, storytellers gather and recite their tales. After each story, the teller moves through the empty room and into the *andon* room, where he puts out a candle and looks into the polished surface. A new tale is begun and the process continues as the light dwindles and the terror rises. Finally only a single story remains – and it is said that if the last candle is put out, the spirits of all the tales will rise up out of the mirror to haunt the world.

To play this game is to draw upon the mystery and enigma of the Void, but to finish is to invite the listening spirits into Ningen-do. Most players give up well before the final tale, and it is traditional for the host to stop the game once there is only one candle left. However, many variations on the Game exist in the Empire's different lands and courts. For example, some gatherings have less time to play and gather their party into many small circles. The group does not begin to gather together in one room until most of the candles are put out. Some Games are played in different venues as well. Some gather in a tiny home such as a village headman's house. Others use a garden or rent a house of entertainment, with candles dotting the various rooms. The polished surface is usually a mirror if such can be afforded, but it can also be polished bronze or steel, or even a bowl of pure water. Mystically-inclined hosts might use a special pond or well that is reputed to be haunted.

The Game of One Hundred Candles is never completely safe. An incautious courtier can be manipulated, tricked, or trapped quite easily by a clever story. Trysts and romances are conducted in these large gatherings, as lovers sneak off under cover of darkness. Duels over presumed insults can occur if a proud samurai has his courage called into question. Yet despite all this, the real threat of the Game is its mystical element. The stories can indeed draw spirits, summoned by the tales about them and





listening to the speakers as each candle goes dim. Indeed, the greatest of storytellers draw the most dangerous spirits with their skill. Rumor has it that at least one Game of One Hundred Candles ended with the entire assemblage disappearing – as the last flame of the final candle winked out, the darkness drew in and none of them were ever seen again.

NIGHT OF ONE HUNDRED STORIES

Challenge: Doji Iawara structured his Game with careful detail. A petition to his lord allowed for the use of one of the resplendent gardens of the Kakita. Considerable favors brought in an army of artisans to establish proper décor. White lilies, chrysanthemums, and lotus flowers hung or floated upon every surface. The cultivated maze would remind the visitors of death at every turn. Tiny andon lanterns, some framed in worked bamboo, others in twisted iron and steel, dotted the landscape like one hundred fireflies. Set at unusual angles, their light shone from up high and from low to the ground, while one rested neatly in the center of the path right after a sharp turn. Incense wafted throughout the passages as the guests arrived. All who mattered were present, along with their yojimbo, servants, advisors, and scribes. They lined the lily pond and partook of the offered hand foods, rice cakes, and fine chilled sake. Above them, the Moon had already set, so the only light was from the one hundred sacred andon of the Game.

“There is a mirror hidden somewhere in the garden,” Iawara told his assembled guests. “You are here tonight to share in the ancient Game, and you will each tell a tale or two this night. There is a candle for each story hidden in the garden, and as we listen, only the starlight upon the lily pool will fight back the terror we summon. You know the rules. With each finished story you will venture into the darkness and put out the candle of your tale. The next will start while you search and wander... all will forget who has disappeared as the next story is recounted. On this night the kami and yorei, the goryo and perhaps even the gaki, look on and listen. Woe to the samurai who must tell the final tale. Woe to the fearful and weak. Tonight we play the Game of One Hundred Candles! I begin with a story...the story of the Kiss of the Kuchisake-Onna...”

Focus: The last individual to recite a tale ventures off into the darkened maze of the garden... and never returns. And just as the last lantern’s light winks out, a scream bursts out from an impressionable young courtier. He claims to have seen a spirit rise from the lily pool.

Doji Iawara does not seem to know what has happened, and implores aid from others in finding out. This dinner party was to be his breakout event, elevating him into the upper tier of politics. If it ends with the tragic loss of an important diplomat of the court... nothing will save his career. He pleads with the PCs to find out what happened, promising any reward within his power.

Strike: What really happened? Perhaps the Game worked. The spirit from the pool may have been summoned by the Game and taken the victim. Was it a hungry ghost? A vengeance-seeking goryo, or a yorei seeking a new body? A maho-summoned spirit conjured forth by a hidden maho-tsukai during the Game? What if the power and mystery of the game simply conjured the soul of the victim into the endless Realm of Void itself? Any of these are possibilities. Alternatively, a GM who wants to trip up the PCs can decide it was a mundane murder by a courtier aware of Iawara’s elaborate planning, using the Game as cover.

Note: The GM can use this C/F/S as part of Nazo Mori by having Doji Iawara (or another NPC) decide that playing the Game of One Hundred Candles could only be enhanced by the presence of such a mysterious and supposedly dangerous location. Iawara and his court could be vacationing near Nazo Mori in order to partake in the Game, and the disappearance could be the start of a greater story.

BUTTERFLY PORTENTS

Challenge: One of the PCs is in the grand home of a prominent female NPC as she presents her son, Boshu, to the eligible samurai-ko of the region. A matchmaker has been called to seek a suitable arrangement, and the PCs are asked to keep an eye on the young man – as bodyguards/yojimbo, as mentors to ease the youth into the ways of court life, as sages or priests offering mystical advice, or whatever else seems appropriate to your campaign. The important thing is for the PCs to be present when Boshu decides to perform his first major poetry recitation in the



garden of his family's estate. If appropriate, Boshu could be coached by a PC to shape and improve his poem. The young man is delicate, a true noble flower of the court with a weak constitution.

On the day of the recitation, Boshu is quite nervous. As the crowd gathers to hear him speak, the clouds part overhead and the radiant light of the Sun beams down upon him. "Surely a sign of blessing!" someone murmurs. As the words of the poem leave Boshu's lips, a tiny white butterfly with the barest hint of red upon its wings alights on the poet's shoulder. Everyone breaks into applause. The poem is remarkable, the scene could not have been better; Boshu must have been blessed by the Fortunes!

Then, with a glorious smile upon his lips, Boshu turns his face up to the Sun and closes his eyes. The butterfly lifts from his body and takes off into the garden. As soon as the creature ceases to touch the young man, he collapses in a heap, like a puppet with cut strings. He has fallen gravely ill and is hurriedly carried away to his quarters. Whispers race one another through the court, and soon a solid rumor develops: surely the portent of a white butterfly – the color of death! – cannot have been a coincidence. Boshu's soul has fled.

Focus: The PCs are summoned before Boshu's mother, a woman not usually taken to superstition but unable to shake off the dire omen. She tasks the characters with either finding the specific butterfly or finding a way to heal her son. Boshu himself lies in his room, wasting away as if from a terrible disease. His breathing is shallow and the tiniest of red dots has appeared on his shoulder, very close to where the butterfly landed. Boshu's mother is distraught; Boshu was her life and a good marriage for him would have secured the family line. Now it seems the boy's soul has fled his body, taken away by evil spirits.

Strike: The GM can choose to let things be exactly as they appear. Butterflies, after all, are rumored to function as physical vessels for the souls of humanity. However, finding a lone white butterfly in a castle, village, or even an entire province is a daunting challenge – especially if the PCs are in the Nazo Mori region, where the butterfly might be something completely different. There is also foul play to consider; perhaps someone took advantage of Boshu's weak constitution by delivering poison or a magical curse with a butterfly. Locating this person would be more important than finding the butterfly itself, of course.

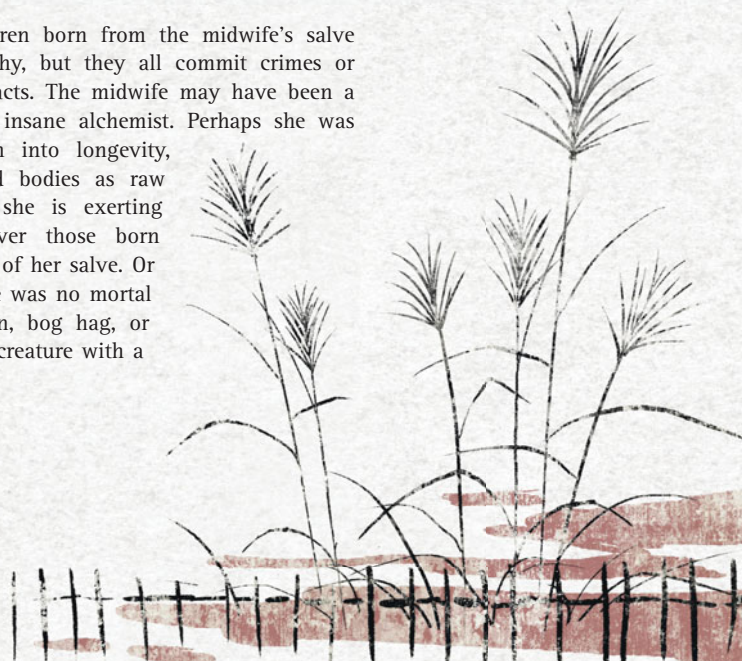


SNAKE OIL

Challenge: The PCs are asked to discover the truth behind a rash of unusual criminal activity within one of the villages near Nazo Mori. The crimes themselves include many thefts, a few murdered or missing peasants, and at least one instance of madness.

Focus: Investigation reveals an odd connection between the different crimes. Each known perpetrator (and the madman) is a first-born child of his or her family. Thorough questioning can eventually unearth a tale from years before: a traveling midwife who claimed to have a salve which would ensure birth upon the first day of the month (considered a blessed sign in these parts). The salve worked perfectly, and all was well for a few years... until one villager discovered that the "salve" was made from the remains of other children who had died in childbirth. The midwife had been concealing the bodies and using them to make her concoction. The midwife fled the town, just ahead of a mob.

Strike: The children born from the midwife's salve are unusually healthy, but they all commit crimes or strange maddened acts. The midwife may have been a maho-tsukai or an insane alchemist. Perhaps she was conducting research into longevity, using the discarded bodies as raw materials. Perhaps she is exerting magical control over those born under the influence of her salve. Or perhaps the midwife was no mortal at all, but a demon, bog hag, or other Shadowlands creature with a dark agenda.



NEW MECHANICS

The six chapters of this book include information on a variety of different groups, magical traditions, creatures, and other things not previously seen in the L5R 4th Edition RPG. As always, these new materials give rise to new game mechanics, gathered here in one place for the convenience of players and GMs.



Chapter One: The Void of War

Legendary Ninja Families

The three “ninja families” and the associated Paths described here do not exist in the canonical Rokugan as anything more than legends and myths. However, GMs may choose to make one or more of these families real in their own versions of the Emerald Empire.

THE HATERU FAMILY (RONIN FAMILY)

Bonus: +1 Intelligence

THE SESAI FAMILY (PHOENIX FAMILY)

Bonus: +1 Agility

THE KOGA FAMILY (PEASANT “FAMILY”)

Bonus: +1 Awareness

NEW RONIN PATH: HATERU NINJA

- ☉ Technique Rank: 2
- ☉ Requirements: Acting 3, Stealth 3

TECHNIQUE: THE FALSE DRAGON

The Hateru specialize in pretending to be Dragon samurai, and have actually infiltrated the Kitsuki family in order to keep tabs on the clan. When using the Acting Skill to play the role of a Dragon samurai, you gain a +2k1 bonus. You gain a Free Raise on any Skill roll made for the purpose of either avoiding leaving clues to your identity or creating false clues to lead enemies away from you.

NEW ALTERNATE PATH: SESAI NINJA

- ☉ Technique Rank: 2
- ☉ Replaces: Shiba Bushi 2
- ☉ Requirements: Stealth 3

TECHNIQUE: ANYTHING FOR THE PHOENIX

When on a battlefield, you gain +1k1 to all Stealth rolls and a Free Raise on all attack rolls made by surprise. When performing dishonorable acts on behalf of the Phoenix Clan, you lose half the normal amount of Honor (rounded up).

NEW RONIN PATH: KOGA NINJA

- ☉ Technique Rank: 1
- ☉ Skills: Acting, Athletics, Chain Weapons, Craft: Poison, Knives (Tanto), Stealth, any one Merchant or Low Skill
- ☉ Outfit: Peasant clothing, dark clothing, knife, any three ninja weapons, traveling pack, 5 zeni
- ☉ Special: This Path is only available to characters who are born into the Koga “family” or who are recruited into it by the existing Koga.

TECHNIQUE: THE PEOPLE’S VENGEANCE

The Koga Ninja specialize in protecting and avenging the common people by killing those samurai who abuse their station. You gain a +1k1 bonus to any Skill roll made against a member of the samurai caste.



Chapter Two: The Void of Magic

Scorpion Clan: The Fading Shadows

The Fading Shadows are a tiny sect operating out of the Hidden Moon Dojo, the secretive Scorpion organization devoted to studying the Nothing and its manifestations in Rokugan. The Fading Shadows recognize that a link may exist between the Nothing and the Void, a disturbing idea but one that provides useful means of defeating the Nothing's machinations. They are predominantly Soshi, but the Hidden Moon Dojo does not hesitate to recruit shugenja from other Scorpion families if it seems advantageous to do so.

NEW ALTERNATE PATH: FADING SHADOWS [SHUGENJA]

- Technique Rank: 5
- Replaces: Any Scorpion shugenja 5
- Requires: Void 4, Spellcraft 5, Forbidden Knowledge: Lying Darkness
- Other: Must be inducted into the Hidden Moon Dojo (exact circumstances up to the GM, but only Scorpion characters of irreproachable loyalty and discretion will even be considered)

TECHNIQUE: UNRAVEL THE SHADOW

The shugenja of the Fading Shadows are trained to perceive the lies and distortions of the Nothing and to disrupt the powers of the Shadowspawn by exploiting their vulnerability to the Void. As a Simple Action, you may spend a Void Point to try to strip away the false identity of any Shadowspawn and other minions of the Nothing within your sight, revealing them for what they are. This requires a Contested Roll of your Void against their Willpower. With a success, the creatures are revealed as what they truly are, and are unable to reassume a false identity as long as they remain in your sight.

As a Free Action, you may spend a Void Point when you cast a spell or make a physical attack. That spell/attack will have full effect on a minion of the Nothing, regardless of normal resistances or immunities.

The Void Mystic

Those born with a Void talent are typically sought out by the *ishi* of the Isawa and either taken on as apprentices or subjected to measures to ensure they will not be a danger to themselves or anyone else. However, some of those attuned to the Void escape such notice. This is not usually due to any active attempt to hide them (although it might be); rather, it simply the enigmatic and inconstant nature of the Void to sometimes "conceal" such individuals from the Phoenix. However it happens, these raw Void talents usually go insane or withdraw from the world and meet obscure ends. One rare occasions, however, such individuals are able to learn a degree of control over their affinity for the Void and become powerful, if unpredictable, mystics.





Void Mystics do not normally belong to a specific clan – the complex customs and politics regarding Void shugenja, particularly with regard to the Isawa, make a clan affiliation problematic. Most clans would rather refer such individuals to the Phoenix in exchange for whatever favors and considerations they can obtain, or perhaps attempt to train them in their own shugenja schools. Thus, in both game terms and social terms, Void Mystics are ronin – itinerate wanderers of dubious sanity, with no clan affiliation. They will often follow a hermetic existence, attempting to remain unknown to the rest of the Empire. Sometimes they will develop reputations as seers or holy men. Such fame can attract the attention of magistrates or even the Isawa ishi, however, so most Void Mystics remain on the move, attempting to conceal their true nature.

Void Mystics may be created as Clan Ronin (as described on page 234 of the L5R 4th Edition Core rulebook), using the Trait Bonus, Skills, and Outfit of their clan's shugenja school but with the Affinity/Deficiency, Technique, and Spells listed below. More commonly, they are True Ronin (Option #2 on page 234), using all the rules of the Void Mystic School listed below; they receive only 5 additional Experience Points during character creation rather than the usual 10.

In either case, the character's future development is confined to the Void Mystic School.

NEW BASIC RONIN SCHOOL: VOID MYSTIC [SHUGENJA]

- ☉ **Benefit:** +1 Willpower
- ☉ **Skills:** Defense, Divination, Hunting, Lore: Elements (Void), Meditation, Stealth, any one non-High Skill
- ☉ **Honor:** 3.5
- ☉ **Outfit:** Sturdy Clothing, Wakizashi, any 1 weapon, Travelling Pack, 5 bu
- ☉ **Affinity/Deficiency:** None. Instead, the Void Mystic begins play with both the Ishiken-do Advantage and the Touch of the Void Disadvantage. You cannot cast spells of the four non-Void Elements except for the basic spells of Sense, Commune, and Summon, and you cannot Importune for spells.

TECHNIQUE: THE VOID'S CARESS

The Void Mystic, born with a close attunement to the Void but lacking any conventional training, does not need to acquire spell-scrolls. You may cast any Void spell up to your current Mastery Level, expending a Spell Slot as normal. Mechanically, the spell is cast as normal, but you do not need to speak aloud to cast your spells. You may only cast each Spell once per day, and you may never cast Void spells above Rank 5. You also gain a Free Raise to the Divination Skill (a by-product of your attunement to the Void).

Spells: As noted above, you may cast any Void Spell within your Mastery Level

Option: If the GM feels the Void Mystic's limited spell abilities are too confining, the Mystic may be granted one additional Spell Slot for each Insight Rank he attains.

The Dragon Channelers

Founded by Agasha Miyoshi, the Dragon Channelers are an elite order of shugenja who are able to directly channel the power of the Celestial Dragons. This not only grants them access to new and unique abilities but also affects the way in which all the kami answer their prayers; even the "normal" spells of a Dragon Channeler are visually distinct from those cast by other shugenja.

This Path is solely restricted to the Phoenix Clan in the canonical timeline. GMs may choose to change this in their own campaigns, of course.

NEW ALTERNATE PATH: DRAGON CHANNELER [SHUGENJA]

- ☉ **Technique Rank:** 6
- ☉ **Replaces:** N/A (must be a Rank 5 shugenja)
- ☉ **Requires:** At least one Ring at Rank 5 or higher, at least two other Rings at Rank 4 or higher, Meditation 5, Spellcraft 5, Lore: Theology 5
- ☉ **Special:** A character can only become a Dragon Channeler if he or she is either personally chosen by the Elemental Dragons or personally trained by an existing Dragon Channeler.

TECHNIQUE: BESEECH THE DRAGONS

You lose any Affinities and Deficiencies you had prior to becoming a Dragon Channeler, instead gaining an Affinity for Dragon spells. Your normal spell slots are reduced by 2 in each Ring; in return, you gain three "Dragon Spell Slots" which can only be used to invoke the powers of the Dragons via Dragon Spells (see below). You may spend Void Points to cast additional Dragon spells when your slots are exhausted. Dragon spell slots do not recover from rest – you may only regain them by sustained meditation (two hours of uninterrupted meditation and Meditation/Void at TN 30 to regain one slot).

GM's Option: Some GMs may wish to create a connection between the Dragon Channelers and the Chosen by the Oracles Advantage (due to the link between the Oracles and the Dragons). If this is desired, a character with Chosen by the Oracles starts with four Dragon Spell slots rather than three.

DRAGON SPELLS

These are not really "spells" as such, but rather are direct releases of the power of the Dragons, channeled through the limited capacities of a mortal. A character who becomes a Dragon Channeler gains the ability to cast three of these spells, without requiring a scroll to cast; the character may learn additional Dragon spells at the rate of one spell per 15 Experience Points.

For mechanical purposes, all Dragon spells are considered to be Mastery 6 spells in their respective Elements (the Thunder Dragon and Celestial Dragon spells are treated as Multi-Element spells). The Channeler may cast the spells with the Void Element even if he does not have the Ishiken-do Advantage. All of these are personal spells (e.g. no range, targeting only the caster). Their durations and effects cannot be changed with Raises.

COURAGE OF THE THUNDER DRAGON (AIR, FIRE)

Duration one hour. You are filled with the unstoppable spirit of Thunder. For the duration of the spell you are immune to Fear and all of your Traits are treated as one Rank higher for the purpose of Skill rolls and Trait rolls.

FEROCITY OF THE FIRE DRAGON (FIRE)

Duration 5 Rounds. You are filled with the aggressive spirit of Fire and wreathed in searing flames of destructive power. Anyone you strike in melee suffers an additional XkX Wounds (where X is your Fire Ring); anyone striking you in melee suffers the same damage.

MYSTERY OF THE VOID DRAGON (VOID)

Duration 10 Rounds. The enigmatic power of the Void, everything and nothing at the same time, infuses you completely. Your awesome aura creates a Fear 5 effect on anyone who sees you (Fear 10 for minions of The Nothing). You gain a number of additional Void Points equal to your Void Ring (if not used by the end of the spell these are lost). Your melee attacks are considered to be Crystal for the purpose of harming creatures of the Shadow.

PERFECTION OF THE CELESTIAL DRAGON (AIR/EARTH/FIRE/WATER/VOID)

Duration 1 hour. The most powerful of all Dragons (and the most difficult to channel) infuses your actions with the ideal perfection of Tengoku. A number of times equal to your lowest Ring + Insight Rank, you may automatically succeed on a Skill Roll or Spell Casting Roll with the maximum possible number of Raises you could call (including Free Raises if you have them).

PROTECTION OF THE EARTH DRAGON (EARTH)

Duration 10 Rounds. The unyielding power of the Earth grants you Reduction 10 and the creature ability of Invulnerability.

TRANQUILITY OF THE WATER DRAGON (WATER)

Duration 5 Rounds. You are immediately healed of all Wounds, poisons, and diseases. For the duration of the spell, you may heal other persons in the same way by touching them; this as a Complex Action.

WHIM OF THE AIR DRAGON (AIR)

Duration 1 hour. The power of Air lifts up your spirit and frees you from the bonds of earth. For the duration of this spell you gain +1k1 to all rolls for Social Skills, and you may fly at a speed equal to three times your normal ground movement.

TIMELINE ADJUSTMENTS: CAN OTHER DRAGONS BE CHANNELED?

As written, the Dragon Channelers Path limits the character to being able to channel the “original” seven Dragons of Tengoku – the five Elemental Dragons, the Thunder Dragon, and the Celestial Dragon. However, in the twelfth century the nature of the Heavens changes in response to mortal actions, and two new Dragons appear in Tengoku – the Jade Dragon and her twin, the Obsidian Dragon, who later ascend to become the Sun and Moon. The era also sees the advent of a sinister being called the Shadow Dragon and an intervention in the mortal world by the truly mysterious entity called P’an Ku.

Can a Dragon Channeler access the power of these beings?

Some GMs may wish to say “no,” given the enormous power which Dragon Channelers can already call upon. However, it is also a valid choice to say “yes” to some or all of these options. If so, the GM may consider the following:

The JADE DRAGON symbolizes spiritual and moral purity, so her spell would most likely create an immunity to Taint and Shadow corruption. Your attacks might also be considered Jade for the purpose of harming Shadowlands creatures.

The OBSIDIAN DRAGON symbolizes temptation, selfishness, and moral (but not spiritual) corruption. A spell channeling him would most likely award bonuses to the Temptation and Intimidation Skills, but would probably diminish the caster’s Honor.

It is unknown whether the SHADOW DRAGON can be Channeled in the same manner as other Dragons. Touching its essence would probably award the abilities of the Goju (walking through walls, leaping between shadows, resistance to mundane weapons, and so forth) but would also quite definitely inflict Shadow Ranks on the character.

P’AN KU, the “mad Dragon,” is a truly mysterious entity whose origins remain shrouded in silence. Some shugenja have theorized he might be an earlier incarnation of the Air or Void Dragon which went mad. Channeling the power of P’an Ku would probably award shapeshifting and mind-reading abilities, but would rapidly drive the Channeler insane.

Finally, it is worth noting that at the time of the Race for the Throne, the Thunder Dragon voluntarily chooses to depart Tengoku in order to allow the spirit of Yoritomo to ascend and become a Kami. In games set after this event, a Dragon Channeler should probably not be able to access the power of the Thunder Dragon.





GM'S TOOLBOX: ADAPTING MULTI-ELEMENT SPELLS AND DRAGON CHANNELERS TO OTHER ERAS OF ROKUGAN'S HISTORY

In the official history of Rokugan, both Multi-Element magic and the Dragon Channelers are tied to specific events and specific individuals in the twelfth century. This makes the game mechanics for these two magical traditions of somewhat limited value, since many L5R campaigns are set prior to the eras in which they are created.

However, the creation of these rare types of magic need not be tied to these specific events. The Agasha family was investigating theories of multi-Element magic for centuries before it was actually created. Any number of other events could have prompted the Agasha to take their studies from theory into practice. For example, the return of the Unicorn – and the obvious gaijin influence on Unicorn magic – might have made the Agasha curious about whether Rokugani magic could be taken in new directions. Alternatively, a Grand Master of the Elements from any era might have taken up the study of multi-Element magic, or an eccentric visionary within the Agasha themselves might have done the same.

In the case of the Dragon Channelers, the options are even more wide open. The Dragons' decision to visit their wisdom on Agasha Miyoshi was something which could have happened in any era to a sufficiently wise and pious shugenja at the Temple of the Seven Dragons. The first Dragon Channeler could have been from any clan, even a Minor Clan – imagine the confusion and controversy within the Empire if the Dragons had chosen to bestow their wisdom on a Moshi, a Kitsune, or a Tonbo!

Multi-Element Magic

Spells using more than one Element are not properly developed until the mid-twelfth century, after the Agasha family joins the Phoenix. Prior to that time, such magic is unknown to the Empire, although a few eccentric Agasha experimented with theories on how it might be possible. In game terms, only the “Agasha” Multi-Element Spells presented in this section are available prior to the Four Winds era, while the “Phoenix” spells become available at that time and the other clan spells become available within a generation after the ascension of Toturi III.

In general, Multi-Element spells outside the Phoenix Clan are quite rare and the GM should exercise care in allowing them into play. An obscure low-Rank shugenja is unlikely to have access to such unusual and experimental magic.

CASTING MULTI-ELEMENT SPELLS

Any Multi-Element spell will list which Elements it uses (typically two, although a few use three). A shugenja who casts a Multi-Element spell makes a Spell-Casting Roll as normal, but the following constraints apply:

The shugenja always uses the lowest Ring Rank of the Elements within the spell.

The casting time for the spell is increased by one Complex Action over the normal casting time for a spell of that Mastery Level.

The shugenja does not gain any benefit from having an Affinity with any of the Elements in the spell. However, any penalty for Deficiency still applies.

The spell expends a Spell Slot in each of its Elements. Thus, a spell which is Air/Fire will expend both an Air slot and a Fire slot each time it is cast.

THE SIX UNIVERSAL MULTI-ELEMENT SPELLS

These spells were devised by the Agasha and then shared with all eight of the Great Clans. They can be found in the libraries of all the major shugenja families, although some of the clans do not see them as much more than curiosities (the Crab and Lion have seen little value in pursuing further Multi-Element magic).

AIR AND EARTH

- Ring/Mastery: Air/Earth 3 [Jade]
- Range: Self
- Area of Effect: Cone 50' long and 30' wide at base
- Duration: Instantaneous
- Raises: Area of Effect (+5' to width or length per Raise), Damage (+1k0 per Raise)

This spell causes a ferocious horizontal cyclone to blast outward from the caster, ripping up pieces of earth into a barrage of wind and stone. The caster must be standing on a natural earth surface (e.g. not in a building or on a ship) in order to cast this spell. Anyone other than the caster within the area of



effect takes 4k2 Wounds (this damage is considered Jade for the purpose of harming supernatural creatures) and is Dazed; they must also make a Contested Earth roll against the caster or be knocked Prone.

FIRE AND AIR

- ☯ Ring/Mastery: Air/Fire 3 [Travel]
- ☯ Range: Self
- ☯ Area of Effect: 10' radius
- ☯ Duration: Instantaneous
- ☯ Raises: Damage (+1k1 per two Raises), Special (+10' to flight distance per Raise)

This spell capitalizes on the explosive relationship between Fire and Air to combine offensive and defensive effects. The Fire spirits unleash a blast of flame to scorch the caster's enemies, while the Air spirits call on the invigorating power of this flame to lift the caster through the air to a safer location nearby. Everyone other than the caster within the spell's area of effect takes XkX in fire damage (where X is the caster's Fire), while the caster flies up through the air and lands up to his Air x20' away, the Air spirits cushioning his descent so he is unharmed. Both effects take place in the same Round.

FIRE AND WATER

- ☯ Ring/Mastery: Fire/Water 2 [Battle]
- ☯ Range: 50'
- ☯ Area of Effect: 10' radius
- ☯ Duration: 2 Rounds
- ☯ Raises: Range (+25' per Raise), Area of Effect (+5' radius per Raise, maximum radius equal to caster's Fire x10'), Duration (+1 Round per Raise)

This spell invokes fire and water spirits at the same time and persuades them to mingle, unleashing a cloud of scalding steam. The area of effect is suddenly filled with super-hot steam which lasts until the spell ends, at which point it disperses. Those caught within the steam suffer 2k2 Wounds each Round they are there (unless they are resistant to heat) and their vision is impaired in the same manner as the Missing Eye Disadvantage until they leave the steam cloud.

EARTH AND FIRE

- ☯ Ring/Mastery: Earth/Fire 4 [Jade]
- ☯ Range: 100'
- ☯ Area of Effect: 5' radius
- ☯ Duration: Instantaneous
- ☯ Raises: Range (+25' per Raise), Area of Effect (double the radius for 2 Raises, can only be done once)

This spell invokes the combined wrath of the Earth and Fire kami, bringing them forth from the ground as a blast of searing magma. Anyone caught in the brief but ferocious blast suffers 5k4 Wounds and is knocked Prone. The damage from this spell bypasses the first 5 points of Reduction on the target, and is considered to be Jade for the purpose of harming supernatural creatures.



WATER AND AIR

- ☯ Ring/Mastery: Water/Air 2 [Divination]
- ☯ Range: 1 mile radius
- ☯ Area of Effect: Self
- ☯ Duration: Concentration
- ☯ Raises: Range (+1/2 mile per two Raises)

This spell combines the communicative powers of the Air kami with the clarity and divination abilities of the Water kami to grant a potent form of long-distance divination. The caster must have access to a body of still water (a large basin or tub, a koi pond, a moat, etc) in order to cast this spell. By gazing into the water, the caster gains access to the vantage of Air spirits within the spell's range, allowing him to look down on any location within that range as though gazing down from the sky, and to hear anything happening in that location. The perspective may be anywhere from a tree-top's height all the way up to the height of the clouds. This spell has obvious military applications, and is known to be used by the Iuchi for such purposes.

WATER AND EARTH

- ☯ Ring/Mastery: Water/Earth 2 [Battle]
- ☯ Range: 100'
- ☯ Area of Effect: 20' radius
- ☯ Duration: 5 Rounds
- ☯ Raises: Range (+25' per Raise), Area of Effect (+5' radius per Raise), Duration (+1 Round per Raise)

This spell persuades the Water kami and Earth kami in the area of effect to mingle, instantly reducing the ground to sticky, high-impassable mud. The spell can be cast anywhere where the ground is normal earth or even stone, but cannot be cast on a finished surface such as a tiled or wooden floor. For the duration of the spell, anyone attempting to physically move through the area of effect can only move a number of feet equal to their Water Ring with a Simple Action, and cannot move at all with a Free Action. Moreover, all such persons suffer a -1k1 penalty to any Agility-based rolls due to the mud impeding their physical motions.





ADVANCED MULTI-ELEMENT SPELLS

These spells have been developed by specific shugenja families, and in general should only be available to characters from those families/clans, and only as special rewards for notable service. The GM can make exceptions if it fits the story, of course, but in general such spells should never be acquired as normal “ranking up” effects.

CLEANSING THE BODY

- ☉ Ring/Mastery: Earth/Water 2 [Jade]
- ☉ Range: Touch
- ☉ Area of Effect: 1 target person (can be the caster)
- ☉ Duration: Instantaneous/24 hours (see description)
- ☉ Raises: Area of Effect (+1 person per two Raises)

The only known Multi-Element spell created by the Kuni family, this spell calls on both the simple cleansing of Water and the spiritual purity of Earth to help protect against both physical and spiritual pollution. A person targeted with this spell is instantly cleansed of all dirt and filth, and gains a +2k1 bonus to any roll made within the next 24 hours to resist or recover from disease, poison, or infection. Moreover, if the target does not have the Shadowlands Taint, the spell also grants a +2k1 bonus to any rolls made to resist getting the Taint within that same 24 hour period. (This benefit does not work on a target who already has at least one Rank of Taint.) This spell cannot be “stacked” – that is, a single person can only benefit from one casting of the spell within a 24-hour period.

THE MOUNTAIN’S WRATH

- ☉ Ring/Mastery: Earth/Fire 4 [Defense]
- ☉ Range: N/A
- ☉ Area of Effect: Self
- ☉ Duration: 4 Rounds
- ☉ Raises: Duration (+1 Round per Raise)

Created by the Tamori family, this spell invokes both the defensive resilience of Earth and the aggressive ferocity of Fire to protect the caster in combat – a common place for the martial Tamori to find themselves. The caster’s skin is covered by a sheath of stone wreathed in an outward layer of flickering red flames. The caster gains Reduction equal to his Earth x3, and any wooden weapon which strikes the caster is set afire. Anyone who touches the caster (or strikes him with unarmed attacks) suffers Xk1 Wounds (where X is the caster’s Fire Rank), and the caster’s own unarmed strikes have their DR increased by the same amount.

WRATH OF THE SUN

- ☉ Ring/Mastery: Fire/Air 5 [Thunder]
- ☉ Range: 100’
- ☉ Area of effect: 30’ radius
- ☉ Duration: Instantaneous
- ☉ Raises: Range (+25’ per Raise), Area of Effect (+5’ radius per Raise)

This spell is a creation of the Moshi family, and invokes both the fury of Fire and the wrathful aspect of Air to mimic the anger of the Moshi family’s patron Fortune, the Sun itself. When cast, it unleashes a blaze of searing light and a concussive detonation of air directly above the target. All those within the area of effect suffer 5k3 Wounds (3k1 Wounds if they are resistant to heat) and are knocked Prone, Dazed, and considered Blinded; during the Reactions stage of each Round they can attempt to recover from the blindness by rolling Stamina at a TN equal to the caster’s Fire x5 (in addition to the normal roll to recover from Dazed).

This spell is noted for being particularly effective against creatures of the Nothing, which suffer an additional 2k2 damage from its effects.

WHISPERING FLAMES

- ☉ Ring/Mastery: Air/Fire 4 [Illusion]
- ☉ Range: 50’
- ☉ Area of Effect: All Rokugani within 50’
- ☉ Duration: Concentration
- ☉ Raises: Range (+25’ per Raise)

Created by the Isawa as a peaceful alternative to lethal battle, this spell creates a transfixing image, forged from the beauty of fire and the whispers of air. Any Rokugani within 50’ who sees the image must roll Willpower each Round against a TN equal to your Spell Casting Roll. If the roll is failed, the target is unable to take any action that Round other than staring at the image. The target may add his Honor Rank to the total of his Willpower roll (as if resisting Temptation), and gains a cumulative +1k0 bonus to the Willpower roll for each additional Round after the first. Also, any target who suffers physical damage is immediately freed from the spell’s effects (in relation to this, it may be noted that the targets are not physically immobilized and thus have their normal Armor TN).

STIFLING WIND

- ☉ Ring/Mastery: Air/Earth 3
- ☉ Range: 100’
- ☉ Area of Effect: 20’ radius
- ☉ Duration: 5 Rounds
- ☉ Raises: Range (+25’ per Raise), Area of Effect (+5’ radius per Raise), Duration (+1 Round per Raise)

Devised by the Soshi to support their shinobi allies, this spell is a more sophisticated development of the original Earth and Air spell. It mingles the Earth and Air kami to create a thick, choking cloud that obscures vision and renders breathing difficult. All those within the area of effect are considered Blinded while they remain within





the cloud and for one Round after they leave (as they must wipe the dirt out of their eyes before they can see again). Moreover, while they remain within the cloud, at the start of their Turn each Round they must roll Stamina at a TN equal to the caster's Earth x5 – if the roll is failed, they can only take Free Actions that Round (due to being choked by dust).

SOUL SWORD

- Ring/Mastery: Earth/Air/Fire/Water 5 [Craft]
- Range: Self
- Area of Effect: Self
- Duration: 10 Rounds
- Raises: Duration (+2 Rounds per Raise), Special (pass the blade to another person for two Raises)

One of the more powerful and complex multi-Element spells known, this Agasha spell is the ultimate expression of the Elemental Weapon spells, combining all four Elements to create a weapon of pure Elemental power. The weapon takes the form of a 5k4 katana and is wielded using the Kenjutsu Skill, but with a +2k2 bonus to attack rolls as the spirits within the blade guide it toward its foes. The Soul Sword is considered to have the properties of both Jade and Crystal for the purpose of who can be harmed by it, and it ignores all effects of enemy armor (both Armor TN and Reduction). If the wielder drops or otherwise loses the sword, the Air spirits within the blade fly it back into his hand as a Free Action.

DROWN THE SPIRIT

- Ring/Mastery: Air/Water/Void 4
- Range: 30'
- Area of effect: 1 target creature
- Duration: 3 Rounds
- Raises: Range (+10' per Raise), Duration (+1 Round per Raise)

One of the very few Multi-Element spells known to use Void magic, this spell can only be cast by a Void shugenja. It was devised by the Isawa ishiken as a way of punishing or outright defeating powerful foes, and it works by using the Void to turn the target's internal Air and Water kami against him. The spell is quite visually spectacular, with the caster gathering a visible ball of dark crackling energy in his hands and then sending it forth to strike and suffuse the target.

The target of the spell has his Strength Rank reduced by an amount equal to the combined total of his Air and Water Rings for the duration of the spell. If this reduces his Strength Rank to zero, he is helplessly immobilized and cannot take Actions until the spell expires.

New Void Spells

COMMUNE WITH THE VOID

- Ring/Mastery: Void 2
- Range: N/A
- Area of Effect: Self
- Duration: 1 Round per question (must maintain concentration)
- Raises: Special (+1 question per three Raises)

Commune with the Void allows the caster to enter into a direct communion with the ineffable Void and thereby gain information in a manner which is superficially similar to the basic Commune spell in the other four Elements. Much like the other Commune spells, this spell allows the caster to seek information. However, the answers tend to be far more enigmatic and unpredictable than those offered by the Elemental kami. The Void, after all, is not an array of individual spirits but a single all-encompassing whole. Thus, while in game terms the caster is still allowed to ask two questions (and can Raise to gain the ability to ask more), in practice the shugenja is not actually "asking" anything, but is using the Void to follow the connections between things and seek insight into their nature and history.

In essence, the GM may answer these questions as completely or as confusingly as he might wish, and can provide information not only from the past but also from the future. (Of course, a wise GM should be wary about being too specific about things that have not happened yet.) The GM can even go beyond the specific question if he wishes, giving the player information not actually sought. On the other hand, the Void is difficult to comprehend – the GM should also feel free to deliver confusing or misleading information, but nothing outright false.





GM's TOOLKIT: VOID OVERLOAD

In the L5R setting, Void magic is often depicted as inherently dangerous, liable to cause madness, confusion, or physical damage if it is not cast properly. Given the disproportionate power of Void magic, the GM may wish to incorporate this aspect of danger and risk into Void spell-casting.

This could be represented in one way by creating consequences for failing to successfully cast a Void spell (i.e. missing the TN of the Spell Casting Roll). A character who fails to cast a Void spell becomes "lost in the Void," unable to withstand the rush of sensation and experience, and is considered Dazed (as described on page 89 of the L5R 4th Edition Core rulebook, with the usual ability to recover with an Earth roll). If the shugenja fails the Spell Casting Roll by an extremely large margin (or with a large number of 1's on the dice), the GM may choose to impose a stronger effect or even a physical impact such as Wounds or physical Disadvantages.

GMs who are willing to add more complexity to their games may also wish to create risk for successful spells that call on the Void to an unusually strong (and thus dangerous) degree – again, the character becomes "lost in the Void" with similar penalties to those listed above. One way to do this would be to tie it to successfully casting powerful spells (e.g. spells of Mastery Level 5 or 6) or successfully casting spells with a large number of Raises. In such circumstances, the GM could require the shugenja to make a Meditation / Willpower roll at a TN equal to 5x (spell's Mastery Level + total number of Raises) to avoid becoming lost in the Void.

Another (and perhaps more interesting) option would be for the character to become lost in the Void if he succeeds in his Spell Casting Roll by an extremely large margin – calling too much of the Void's power. In this option, the character could become Dazed if he beats the TN by 20 or more, with higher rolls producing correspondingly greater penalties.

Finally, it may be noted that the penalties do not all have to be game-mechanic effects. Creative GMs can also choose to apply more role-play oriented effects, such as a character's hair turning white, facial features becoming prematurely aged, or a mild speech impediment.



STRENGTHEN THE VOID

- ☉ Ring/Mastery: Void 2
- ☉ Range: N/A
- ☉ Area of Effect: 20' radius from caster
- ☉ Duration: 5 Rounds
- ☉ Raises: Area of Effect (+5' radius per two Raises), Duration (+1 Round per Raise)

This spell allows the caster to thin the veil separating the Void from reality, enhancing the power of the Void within the local area. This is often used when training young ishi, allowing them to touch the Void more readily, but it has a practical value in that anyone within its effect can better harmonize with the Void and thus better reach their own physical and spiritual potential.

While this spell is in effect, anyone within the Area of Effect gains a Free Raise to casting Void spells; however, the intensity of the Void in the area makes it harder to focus enough on individual Elements cast other spells, inflicting a +5 TN penalty on all non-Void spells. Also, anyone who spends a Void Point within the area of effect gains a +2k1 bonus instead of the normal +1k1.

Any creature of the Lying Darkness (and any mortal with at least 1 Shadow Rank) who enters the area of effect will feel a deep sense of discomfort. Such creatures and individuals must roll Willpower at TN 20 or suffer a +10 TN penalty to all their Skill rolls and attack rolls made while they are within the area of effect. If they fail the Willpower roll by more than 10, they must try to leave the area of effect and cannot voluntarily re-enter it.

BANISH THE VOID

- ☉ Ring/Mastery: Void 3
- ☉ Range: N/A
- ☉ Area of Effect: 20' radius from caster
- ☉ Duration: 5 Rounds
- ☉ Raises: Area of Effect (+5' radius per two Raises), Duration (+1 Round per Raise)

This spell is the exact counterpoint to Strengthen the Void; it thickens the veil between the Void and reality, making it more difficult to perceive the Void or to call on the inner harmony which the Void represents. This spell is normally used by ishiken to control the activities of their more powerful and dangerous apprentices, but is sometimes employed in more practical venues as well.

Within this spell's area of effect, casting other Void spells suffers a +10 TN penalty. Also, anyone wishing to spend Void Points within this area must spend two Void Points to gain the effects of one. If the character only has one Void Point, he cannot spend it within the area of effect.

GM's Note: It is left to the GM's decision whether the effects of Strengthen the Void and Banish the Void also apply to "Void-like" effects such as Naga Akasha or the ratling Name.

ESSENCE OF VOID

- Ring/Mastery: Void 4
- Range: 50'
- Area of effect: One target creature
- Duration: Concentration
- Raises: Range (+10' per Raise), Special (+1k0 to Contested Roll per Raise)

This spell allows the ishiken to suffuse another living creature with the pure essence of the Void, overwhelming the creature's bodily functions and rendering that creature inert and unmoving so long as the spell remains in effect. The caster must be able to see the target, and the spell requires a successful Contested Void Roll (creatures without a Void Ring may resist with Name, Akasha, or Willpower at the GM's discretion). If the target fails the Contested Roll, it is held immobile, unable to move, speak, or otherwise act of its own volition so long as the caster maintains concentration. On the second and subsequent Rounds of the spell, the target may make another Contested Roll during the Reactions Stage to throw off the spell's effects.

Chapter Three: Void of Peace

THE ORDER OF EBISU

The monks of this small order spend most of their time among the common folk, but do occasionally interact with the samurai caste to offer counsel or to report abuse of the heimin. They seek to teach those who forsake Compassion and to bolster those who already practice it, subtly influencing the courts with their ideals. They use teaching, education, and example to spread their views rather than relying on actual political negotiation, and their effect can often be quite subtle. Monks who serve Ebisu are known to be extremely patient and will labor without complaint for endless days, awaiting the moment when their work can bear fruit among the samurai.

NEW BROTHERHOOD PATH: ORDER OF EBISU [MONK/COURTIER]

- Devotion: Fortunist
- Rank: 3
- Replaces: Thousand Fortunes Monk 3, Jurojin's Blessing Monk 3
- Requires: At least two heimin Craft Skills at Rank 3 or higher

TECHNIQUE: THE VOICE OF HUMILITY

The monks of the Order of Ebisu spend their time among the peasants, seeking enlightenment by sharing the simple work of the heimin. However, on those occasions when they offer counsel to the samurai caste or make appeals on behalf of the peasants, their humble labors grant them an aura of serene enlightened harmony which even the most



stubborn or callous samurai finds difficult to resist. In order to use this Technique, you must spend time working alongside the peasants at humble tasks (e.g. utilizing the Craft Skills associated with this Path). For each week you spend laboring in this manner, you gain a bonus Void Point which you may only spend on those Craft Skills, on Medicine Skill Rolls made to help peasants/hinin, or on Social Skill Rolls made against samurai. The maximum number of these bonus Void Points you may "hold" are equal to your Void Rank.

Chapter Four: The Void Within

NEW ADVANTAGE: REINCARNATED [SPIRITUAL] (6 POINTS, 5 FOR HENSHIN AND FOR CHARACTERS WITH ANCESTORS)

Despite having passed through Meido, you retain some faint recollection of your previous life. You gain +1k0 to any three non-School Skills of your choice (subject to GM's approval). Any time you spend a Void Point to enhance a roll using one of those Skills, you suffer the effects of the Anachronism disadvantage (from the L5R 4th Edition supplement *Imperial Histories*, page 241) for 1-10 hours. In addition, you will occasionally have dreams or vague memories from your previous life, which may or may not become relevant to your current existence.

Note: GMs who allow Naga characters may also opt to make this Advantage available to Naga to represent the ancestral memories of the Akasha. If used in this way, it costs 7 points and does not impose the Anachronism penalty.





NEW DISADVANTAGE: UNCENTERED [SPIRITUAL] (MONK ONLY, 2 POINTS FOR CLAN MONKS, 4 POINTS FOR BROTHERHOOD MONKS)

Whether it is due to poor teaching, a lack of understanding on your part, or simply an absence of true harmony within your soul, you are incapable of mastering the deepest mysteries of the Void. You may not learn any Void Kiho and you cannot take the Ishiken-do or the Void Versatility Advantages.

New Void Kiho

KNOWLEDGE FROM WITHIN

- ☯ Type: Internal
- ☯ Mastery: 4

The power of the Void allows a centered monk to sense the presence of other magical effects in the area. You must be meditating or in the Center Stance to activate this Kiho. Once it is active, you become generally aware of the presence of Elemental spell effects and nemuranai (within a radius equal to your Void x10 in feet) so long as you maintain the Kiho. You will know the general direction and nature of the effects/objects (e.g. "a Fire spell in that direction") but not their specific identity or specific location.

MIND/NO-MIND

- ☯ Type: Mystical (atemi)
- ☯ Mastery: 6

Monks practice meditation in order to attain the thought-free clarity of a pure soul on the path to Enlightenment. This Kiho allows a monk to briefly bestow this clarity on another person... whether or not that person wishes it. You make an atemi strike and a Contested Roll of your Void against your target's Fire. If you win the Contested Roll, your target's mind is momentarily purged of all thoughts, and he forgets everything that has happened during the last minute. At the GM's option, this might also cause the target to be Dazed for one Round. (It may also be noted that this Kiho has helpful applications, such as calming someone who is overwhelmed with fear, rage, grief, or other uncontrolled emotion.)

REBUKE OF THE HEAVENS

- ☯ Type: Kharmic
- ☯ Mastery Level: 5

Your holy authority can cow disruptive spirits and weaken their influence. This Kiho may target any one supernatural creature (an entity not native to Jigoku or

Tengoku). It is activated as a Complex Action by performing some gesture of spiritual rebuke, such as chanting a sutra, shaking a ringed staff, or forming a mudra with your hands. (This is in addition to the normal roll to activate a Kiho.) Make a Contested Roll of your Meditation / Void against the creature's highest Ring – if you succeed, the creature suffers a -Xk1 penalty to all rolls, where X is your Monk School Ranks. This penalty continues until the creature is slain or it departs from your presence.

This Kiho is only available to monks, not to shugenja.

SENSE THE BALANCE

- ☯ Type: Kharmic (atemi)
- ☯ Mastery Level: 6

The spiritual balance of individuals can be felt in the flow of their chi. The Air kiho called Harmony of the Mind allows monks to sense a few of another person's inner secrets, but those who follow the path of Void can do so far more effectively. If you succeed at an atemi strike on your target, you may spend a Void Point to learn the total number of Spiritual Advantages or Disadvantages (one or the other, your choice) which the target possesses. If you succeed in a Contested Void roll, you may also learn the name and specific nature of the Advantage / Disadvantage with the highest point value – e.g. you not only learn the target is Cursed by the Realms, but also which Spirit Realm has cursed him. Subsequent uses of this Kiho against the same target can reveal a new Advantage or Disadvantage each time, until there are no more to learn.

STRIKING THROUGH THE VOID

- ☯ Type: Martial
- ☯ Mastery: 7

This rare martial Void Kiho allows you to channel the power of the Void into your unarmed strikes. It is controversial within the more peaceful sects of the Brotherhood, who believe that the Void should not be used as a weapon. When active, this Kiho allows you to spend a Void Point on damage rolls for your unarmed strikes (one Void Point per attack).

THE WORLD DISAPPEARS

- ☯ Type: Internal
- ☯ Mastery: 6

Those who are approaching the edge of Enlightenment are said to float slightly above the ground, their pure souls buoying them up toward the Heavens. This Kiho allows you to temporarily attain this rarified state. You must be meditating or in the Center Stance to activate this Kiho. Once it is active, you float a few inches above the ground for as long as it remains active, and can move at your normal speed across any surface (ground, water, molten lava) without touching it. This serene disconnection from the ground also makes you immune to Grappling and Entangling attacks while the Kiho remains active.



The Order of Eternity

The monks of this Order seek to understand the nature of time and divine the proper moment at which to act. They have a reputation for peculiar behavior, and their monasteries have no structured schedules or activities. Order of Eternity monks may do nothing for hours at a time or suddenly take violent action, all according to whether they believe it is the right time to do something. Consequently, they often come across as intellectually deficient or even slightly insane.

NEW MONK SCHOOL: THE ORDER OF ETERNITY

- **Benefit:** +1 Intelligence
- **Devotion:** Shintao
- **Skills:** Defense, Divination (Astrology), Jiu-jutsu, Meditation, Lore: Theology, any two High Skills

TECHNIQUE: THE TOUCH OF ETERNITY

The monks of this Order believe that time is an illusion and that the events of the past, present, and future are all coexistent. This causes them to engage in many strange actions, but also allows them an unusual degree of insight into the world around them. You may contemplate a non-combat situation, for an amount of time determined by the GM (the monks of this Order have been known to size up a complex situation in an instant, but also to spend an hour considering whether to eat a bowl of rice). At the end of your contemplation, you roll Meditation / Void at TN 25 (higher for complex situations). With a success, you gain a bonus of +1k1 +Void to any Skill Rolls you make to try to resolve that specific situation.

The GM should exercise good judgment in considering the application of the Order of Eternity Technique – some situations may be too complex to master with a single consideration. In general, the monk should not be able to apply this Technique's benefits to more Skill Rolls than his Void Rank – any rolls beyond that will require further contemplation and another Meditation / Void roll.

NEW ALTERNATE PATH: ABBOT [MONK]

Those whom the Brotherhood honors with election to a position of leadership are given additional training from senior monks, and also gain influence and social status within their Orders and the Brotherhood as a whole.

- **Technique Rank:** 4+
- **Replaces:** Any Brotherhood Rank 4 or higher (potentially lower Ranks as well, see Special below)
- **Special:** The character must gain an appointment as the abbot of a monastery. This is ordinarily reserved for

monks of Insight Rank 4 or higher, but unusual circumstances may result in a less experienced character being promoted by his brethren (GM's adjudication in such situations).

TECHNIQUE: THE REVERENCE OF WISDOM

Your fellow monks have chosen to honor you by elevating you to the position of abbot at your monastery. Within the Brotherhood, you are now considered to be Status 4.0. When interacting with members of your own Order, you gain +1k1 to all Social Skill rolls (except Temptation). With outsiders of all types, you add +1k0 to those rolls instead.

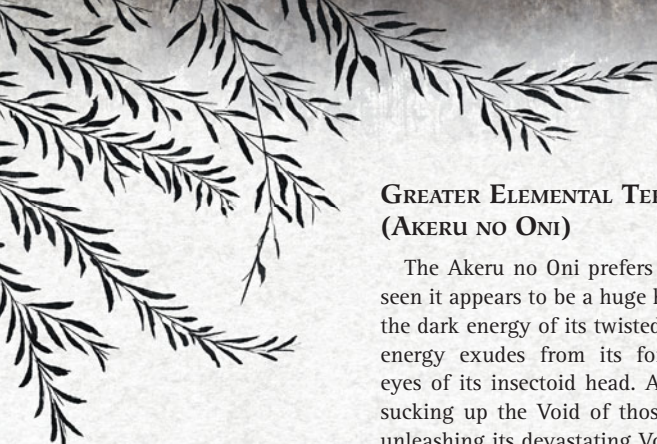
Note: If the GM is using the Duty Points system from Appendix One of the L5R 4th Edition supplement *Emerald Empire*, this Path awards 10 Duty Points.

Chapter Five: The World is Not the World

ELEMENTAL TERRORS OF VOID

The Elemental Terrors of Void are rarely encountered, but their touch can potentially be felt at any location and at any time. They are the servants, assassins, and spies of the Dark Oracle of Void (one of the most powerful servants of the Realm of Evil) but can also sometimes be summoned by maho-tsukai or Lost of exceptional power. The Greater Terror is sent as an assassin to tear an enemy's soul and body from the great cycle of rebirth itself, while its weaker cousin, the Lesser Terror of Void, more often serves as an agent of information and chaos – though it is capable of creating its own forms of karmic imbalance.





GREATER ELEMENTAL TERROR OF VOID (AKERU NO ONI)

The Akeru no Oni prefers to remain hidden, but when seen it appears to be a huge humanoid beast rippling with the dark energy of its twisted and stolen Void. A negative energy exudes from its form and glows through the eyes of its insectoid head. Akeru no Oni waits patiently, sucking up the Void of those around it until capable of unleashing its devastating Void Strike. The creature is by no means a coward, but it will not hesitate to retreat at any sign of being outmatched, preferring to return when the advantage has shifted in its favor.

AIR: 4 EARTH: 4 FIRE: 4 WATER: 4 VOID: 1
(SEE BELOW)

Initiative: 9k4

Attack: Claws 9k4 (Simple),
Void Strike 9k4 (Complex)

Damage: Claw 3k3,
Void Strike 10k10 (see
below)

Armor TN: 30

Reduction: 6 (bypassed by
jade, crystal, or obsidian)

Wounds: 32: +5; 64: +10; 128:
Dead

Shadowlands Taint Rank: 6.0

Skills: Hunting 4, Intimidation 4, Stealth 6

Special Abilities:

- ☉ **Fear 5**
- ☉ **Huge**
- ☉ **Invulnerable**
- ☉ **Magic Resistance:** An Akeru no Oni has three Ranks of Magic Resistance against Void spells (only).
- ☉ **Sap the Void:** Void Points spent within 100' of an Akeru have their effects cancelled. Akeru no Oni adds these points to its own pool of Void. Additionally, anytime the Akeru strikes a target with its Claw attack, it may make an Opposed Void Roll. Success allows it to sap one Void Point from the target in addition to inflicting normal damage. (If the GM wishes, Akasha Points and other similar Traits can be affected in the same manner.)
- ☉ **Telepathy:** The Akeru does not speak. Its voice is simply heard, forced upon the minds of those within a thousand feet. However, it cannot read thoughts other than those directed toward it.
- ☉ **Void Strike:** The Akeru no Oni is capable of unleashing its stolen Void in a horrifying beam of pure energy with a range of 50'. This attack requires it to have its full 7 Void Points, and uses up all but 1 of those Void Points. Anyone killed by Void Strike is ripped from the Celestial Wheel, permanently removed – body and soul – from the cycle of Rebirth.
- ☉ **Void Use:** The Akeru is one of the few inhuman creatures capable of using the Void in the same manner as mortals. However, its Void is not inherent and must be stolen (using the Sap the Void ability). The Akeru's default Void Rank is 1 (maintained by slowly leeching Void from the fabric of the surrounding universe), but increases as it accu-

mulates Void Points with its Sap the Void ability, to a maximum of 7. If the Akeru is ever reduced to a Void Ring of zero, it is instantly destroyed.

- ☉ **Walk Through Nothing:** The Akeru is capable of slipping between the physical elements of the world, walking through the "realm of Void." In order to find the Akeru while it is hidden in this way, a character must succeed at an Opposed Roll of Perception against the Akeru's current Void Ring. The Akeru must emerge and reveal itself in order to attack.

LESSER ELEMENTAL TERROR OF VOID (KUKANCHI NO KANSEN)

The Kukanchi no Kansen exist as a tiny smear of liquid night, as dark as the space between the stars. Like their more powerful cousins, Kukanchi prefer to remain in their natural hidden state, and they do not have to reveal themselves to unleash their Void Leech attacks. Thus, they only show themselves when forced to do so. They have both a natural mischievous curiosity and a sinister arrogance, sometimes leading them to inadvertently reveal themselves to creatures with the ability to detect mystical or hidden things.

AIR: 2 EARTH: 2 FIRE: 2 WATER: 2
REFLEXES: 4 AGILITY: 3 PERCEPTION: 3

Initiative: 5k4

Attack: 4k3 Void Leech (Simple)

Damage: 2k1 plus Void
Leech (see below)

Armor TN: 25

Reduction: none

Wounds: 16: +5; 32: +10; 48:
Dead

Shadowlands Taint Rank: 5.0

Skills: Stealth 4

Special Abilities:

- ☉ **Insubstantial:** The Kukanchi remains in a constant ephemeral state, even when it attacks. It moves without sound, passing through physical objects as easily as through air. Moreover, the Kukanchi no Kansen remains invisible (even when attacking) unless it wishes to reveal itself. Individuals capable of perceiving invisible creatures must still make a Contested Roll of Investigation/Perception Roll against the Kukanchi's Stealth/Agility.
- ☉ **Invulnerable**
- ☉ **Spirit**
- ☉ **Swift 3**
- ☉ **Telepathy:** Like their more potent brethren, the Kukanchi do not actually speak, but are instead "heard" within the mind of their targets within a thousand feet. They are also capable of perceiving the basic surface thoughts and emotional state of their targets. If summoned or in the service of a powerful being (such as an Oracle or Akeru no Oni), the range of Kukanchi's telepathy is infinite.
- ☉ **Void Leech:** If one or more of the Kukanchi no Kansen's damage dice explode, it also drains one Void Point from its victim and heals itself 15 wounds.



CHILDREN OF THE LAST WISH

These entities are intelligent (or at least semi-intelligent) creations of pure Void, born from the power of Isawa's Last Wish. Physically, they appear as semi-corporeal miniature female samurai, their eyes glowing with the magical power which suffuses their beings. Their motivations are mysterious; they were created as companions and guardians to the Last Wish, and following the destruction of that entity their primary interest seems to be the creation of the new Wish. In the meantime they are willing to serve the Phoenix, although the clan has been wary of calling on their power.

AIR: 1 EARTH: 2 FIRE: 2 WATER: 1 VOID: 5
AWARENESS: 4 WILLPOWER: 4 AGILITY: 3 PERCEPTION: 3

Initiative: 6k4

Attack: "Sword" 6k3 (Complex, see below)

Damage: 4k2

Armor TN: 25

Reduction: 10 against

Wounds: 100: Dead

Magic, total against all other effects (see Superior Invulnerability)

Skills: Any Skill needed at 3

Special Abilities:

- **Incorporeal:** The Children can pass through non-living physical matter as easily as they walk through the air.
- **Spellcasting:** The Children can cast spells (including Void spells) as though they are Rank 3 shugenja with an Affinity for Void and no Deficiency. They seem to be able to cast any spell they wish within those limitations.
- **Spirit**
- **Superior Invulnerability:** The Children can only be harmed by magic, and are wholly immune to physical attacks no matter what spiritual substances are used against them.
- **Void Weapon:** The sword-shaped objects which the Children use as weapons are essentially just Void wrapped in a thin sheath of physical existence. As such, they ignore the effects of armor on their opponents' Armor TN, and their damage cannot be reduced or negated in any way.
- **Void Usage:** The Children can use Void Points, but may only spend them to enhance Skill Rolls.



Chapter Six: Nazo Mori

NEW ADVANTAGE: WATANU-TRAINED (MENTAL) [1 POINT]

The Watanu ronin of Iron Heart Village are well known throughout the region for their superior skills in smithing. Select one Craft Skill related to the creation of metallic goods (not weapons or armor). When making Skill Rolls to create such items, you gain a bonus of +1k1.

NEW ADVANTAGE: IRON HEART NATIVE (PHYSICAL) [2 POINTS]

Your ancestors are from the region near Iron Heart Village, and the traits common to that region remain manifest in you. You gain a bonus of +1k0 to any Stamina Trait Roll or to any non-damage roll using the Strength Trait (including rolls to control Grapples).

NEW ADVANTAGE: LAUGHING PLAINS NATIVE (MENTAL) [2 POINTS]

You possess the traits indigenous to the people of Laughing Plains Village, from whence some distant ancestor of yours originated. Your dour and bleakly stoic outlook on life grants you a bonus of +5 when rolling to resist any Fear effect.

NEW ADVANTAGE: SACRED FOREST NATIVE (MENTAL) [2 POINTS]

The spiritual folk of Sacred Forest Village consider you one of their own due to the nature of your ancestry, which includes someone from that region. You gain +1k0 to rolls with Lore: Theology and Lore: Spirit Realms.

THE GHOSTS OF THE FOREST

The Ghosts of the Forest are a small band of ronin with a legacy many generations old. They tend to recruit from their own family lines, and there are some members who are the sixth or seventh generation to take up the banner of defending Nazo Mori.

NEW RONIN PATH: GHOST OF THE FOREST

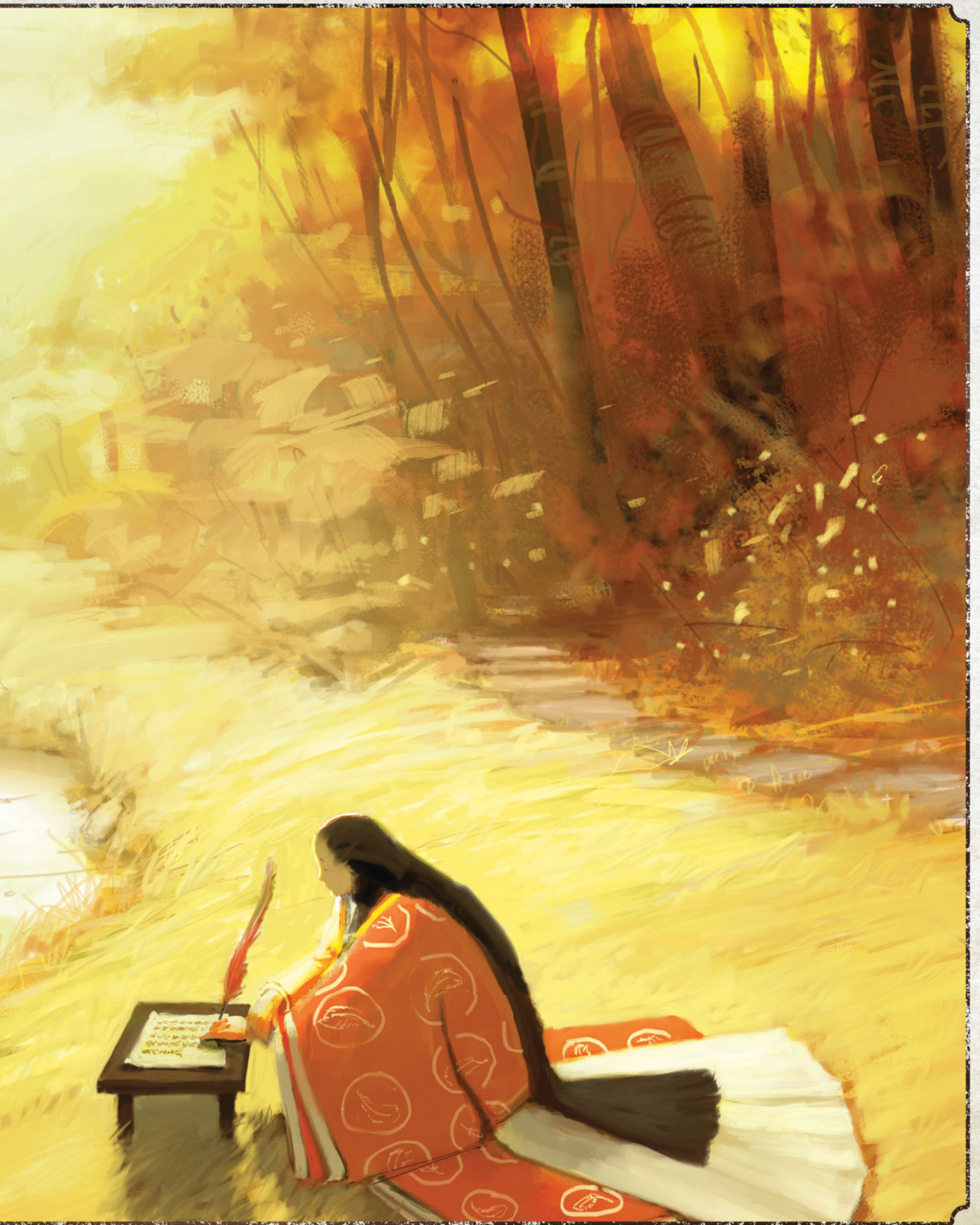
- Technique Rank: 2
- Requirements: Way of the Land (Nazo Mori), Lore: Spirit Realms 2

TECHNIQUE: WALK AMONG THE TREES

The enigmas of the forest at Nazo Mori are more familiar to you than almost anyone else in the Empire. Whenever you are within a woodland area, you gain a Free Raise on all Athletics, Hunting, and Stealth Rolls. If you are within sight of Nazo Mori, you also gain a bonus of +1k0 on any roll involving the Perception Trait (these effects can stack).







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"Emptiness is the true center, the place where action and thought lose meaning and become the same thing."

- MIRUMOTO

The way of the Void is different for every samurai, for the Void itself encompasses every choice and none. Some study it, some hide from it, some are overcome by it, but none can ignore it. The Void is everywhere.

The final volume of the Elemental Series presents the world of the strangest Element of all – the Void. Infinite and yet unattainable, enigmatic and all-knowing, the Void suffuses every aspect of Rokugan. Those who master its secrets attain power like no others, but all too often the Void drives its acolytes to madness. Secrets, mysteries, and enigmas abound in every corner of the Emerald Empire, and this book explores them all:

- ❶ Complete discussion of the philosophical, religious, and supernatural aspects of the Void in Rokugan.
- ❷ Detailed examination of the notorious Ishiken (the Phoenix Void Shugenja).
- ❸ An array of mysteries and enigmatic legends for GMs and players to incorporate into their campaigns.
- ❹ A complete campaign setting: the sinister forest of Nazo Mori.
- ❺ New game mechanics including multi-Element magic, the Dragon Channellers, the Void Mystic
- ❻ And much more!



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