

THE IMPERIAL HERALD

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LEGEND OF THE FIVE RINGS INTERACTIVE STORYLINE COLLECTIBLE CARD & ROLEPLAYING GAMES

Celestial Edition is Coming!!

BY MARK WOOTTON LEAD DEVELOPER, LEGEND OF THE FIVE RINGS

It is time to give you the lowdown on what we are trying to achieve in Celestial Edition. I will be talking about the cards a little, but I want to focus more on our thought processes than on the detail of the set. You will find out enough about that soon. Instead, I am going to try to give a better insight into why we make the decisions we do, as opposed to what those decisions are.

I hope this will allow you to watch the Celestial environment grow together with us, and when you see things that are not fully developed, you will understand how and why we are working toward something. And I think it would be great to have all of you in the community understand what we want to achieve from the get go.

So what are we going to cover? I want to talk through a few of our basic principles, key rules changes, and mechanical themes. I want to also talk about some of the cards that we have removed and some slightly more esoteric ideas, like the way we are completely redefining how we deal with reactions.

Hopefully at the end of all this you will have a better understanding of our intent than you have ever had at the start of any L5R arc.

So, without further ado...

BASIC PRINCIPLES

I know I said this in my last Herald article but it is worth restating: We want to create more room for the game to grow throughout Celestial than we did in Samurai.

In Samurai we created a card pool that meant a number of decks were pretty much as well developed as they were going to be for the whole arc, right at the start. I believe a key issue for designing a good base set for a card game is not about using all the best cards. It is about creating a framework where players have choices—sometimes difficult ones—in design and in the way they play and see the game develop. Where the cards are not all of the same power level and where they do not all smoothly fit together into a predefined deck concept, player skill and creativity are at an optimum. The main thing to remember is that if things are a bit below the curve to start with, then they should be that way pretty evenly across the spectrum of decks and clans. A central tenet of the Celestial arc has been that the excitement is in the playing of the game. Its not about the power of the individual cards chosen, it is about the quality of the choices as a group.

The next design principle was “the same but different”. The vast majority of players have been very supportive of what we have tried to achieve in Samurai. The level of interaction and the style of play are both widely appreciated by the player base. And whilst I accept that we can never have universal approval, I think in many ways we have hit a sweet spot for most players. So the challenge with Celestial is to keep much of the style of the Samurai, but make the game feel different. In some ways



This gives the player choices. They can use Border Keep a second time early in the game to try and squeeze a bit better early start, or they can save it till the mid-game to avoid the one turn that can really hurt when too much gold appears. As a singular holding that starts in play, this means that the ability although powerful is not easily abused as it would be with multiple copies.

Finally, each player starts the game with six cards, and the player going second has an additional holding called Bamboo Harvesters that straightens on the second turn. Neither Bamboo Harvesters nor Border Keep counts toward minimum deck size.

CARD CHOICES IN CELESTIAL

In terms of card choices, we wanted to shake things up. Obviously I cannot go through card-by-card, but I think that I can give you some pointers as to why we made the choices we did. From that perhaps you will be able to draw your own conclusions on some of the rest.

First thing was about trying to cut down on any cards that had complex and hard-to-explain rulings. There is nothing worse than spending large parts of a game trying to figure out unfathomable interactions between cards. A number of the cards that fall into this category are notorious reactions like

Misdirection and Determination. And the thing is, it's not like we couldn't reproduce those effects in simpler ways with fewer problems going forward. But we were clear that they were not the kind of card we wanted for the start of the arc.

The second thing we wanted to do was make card advantage less of an issue. Even at the start of Samurai there were already cards that altered the balance between players' Fate resources pretty dramatically—Stay Your Blade, Knowledge, and Ordered Retreat. They represent either straightforward card draw, or the ability to effectively undo a significant part of the work done by your opponent (work which may well have cost him or her several fate cards—in effect netting card advantage). All of these are gone.

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CELESTIAL EDITION

circumstance has helped us. The timing of the decision to move to a new look for the cards was lucky in terms of our goal here—because it goes a long way to giving the game another atmosphere. And I think the work that has gone into the design and development of the look has resulted in a spectacular-looking game—one with an even stronger tie to the samurai genre. However, a number of the other key decisions are mechanical...

THE WAY WE START THE GAME

When you sit down to teach new players, have you ever found them looking a bit puzzled as you go through the first turn or two? It

involves lots of shuffling, deck searching, but perhaps most confusingly, the basic Dynasty mechanic of flipping provinces is really almost a secondary function until you reach a certain board position. And how many people have had games in tournaments where that extra five minutes would have got them the result? I know there are a few of you out there!

The new way of starting the game is intended to deal with that. In essence, we will start the game from turn two. We have removed the Legacy holding rule, and each player now starts the game with a holding called Border Keep in play. Its first ability now means that the normal first turn of Samurai Edition is pretty much in place at the start of the game:

“Limited: If it is your first turn: Put one or more cards in your provinces at the bottom of your deck, refilling the provinces face-up.”

The time taken in searching and shuffling decks is gone. In fact, you will notice in Celestial that deck-shuffling effects are reduced in general—simply because we want to make sure that games can be played in a timely manner.

However, the other key with Border Keep is that we know players hate losing to the mid-game gold flood. So we gave it another ability—a duplicate of the first-turn one, but usable anytime:

“Limited: Put one or more cards in your provinces at the bottom of your deck, refilling the provinces face-up.”



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Going into Celestial, we want there to be some card draw, but we don't want players to be able to too easily open up a gap between themselves and their opponent in terms of cards in hand. We also want the cards that can develop card advantage to be tied into themes, and therefore more easily balanced and controlled. I am going to talk about themes later, but an obvious simple example of this approach is that we want one of the themes, Tactician, to be about slightly improved card access. Hence cards like Favour to the Horde. Tying card draw to more specific circumstances and to certain keywords means that we can diversify it through a range of cards without it getting out of hand too easily.

Although we do not think that Samurai was bad, what we are hoping for is an overall more balanced approach to card draw and card advantage.

RULES AND REACTIONS

In terms of the rules and other card interactions, there are a couple of big things. The first is a rules change: You may now bring a Unique card into play if an opponent already has one on the table.

We thought long and hard about this. Certainly we work hard to get a good tie-in with the simulation logic of the game. But we all know that there cannot be complete consistency. In the end, we decided that the game-play experience ought to be our guide. In too many Clan mirror matches, the game is simply a race to unique personalities. Often a player's turn can be devastated by having their ability to bring personalities into play removed simply because they are playing a player of the same clan. We want people to be able to play with all their cards as far as is possible. This rule change allows that.

A welcome knock-on effect from this is that Rings can now be unique and not need their own sub-set of rules.

The last change of note here that you are going to see is that we no longer have Action Cards.

It's OK, no time to panic! Action Cards will be known as Strategy Cards. These cards will still have actions on them, but we will no longer have any confusion between actions and Action Cards. Any type of card will be able to produce an action, exactly as now, it just means that we can more clearly distinguish between the card type and the action that it generates. We think that this will have positive implications on ruling clarity going forward.

I think that, alongside the new start rules, these are the most obvious changes in Celestial.

The last thing I want to mention in this section is our new approach to reactions. Although not a rules change per se, we have been working hard with the timing of reactions to have a positive impact on rules and rulings.

My perception, certainly during my time on Design, has always been that many of the most complex rules and rulings around cards have been around reactions. So we have set ourselves a goal for this arc. In simple terms we have created a series of guidelines as to what in-game circumstances we are allowed to create reactions for. What we are shooting for here is a series of predefined triggers, that allow us to better understand the timing effects of every reaction we design. In doing that we hope that this will make things clearer for the player base because you will start to see the same trigger points for the same kind of reaction.

MECHANICAL THEMES

We want to be a lot clearer about what Keywords do. The reason we are going down this road is that we want to give each theme a stronger identity, not only for that subclass, but also in developing how that subclass works slightly differently for each clan.

Now let me put a rider on this. We are not saying that you will never see an effect that does not follow this set of principles. Rather, cards that relate to a keyword theme will tend to follow that model, or at least work with it in some way. So here we go—direct from our in-house Design guidelines that we drew up before Celestial Design even began...



SCOUT

Mechanically, Scout actions focus on the concept of prior knowledge of a battle site. So, either they Recon in advance (giving their player some sort of mechanical advantage at the site), or they have Battle actions that work after a battle location has been targeted by a Recon action.

MAGISTRATE

Mechanically, Magistrate actions focus on changing the state of a personality based on their Personal Honor (using their Chi as a comparator when one is needed to simulate "investigation") and punishing dishonorable personalities. Their actions are generally better at punishing dishonorable status than creating it.

HERO

Mechanically, Heroes focus on being individual powerhouses, they are resistant to the effects that face mere mortal equivalents. Their actions focus undoing their own disadvantageous position (e.g. being bowed), or resisting such actions as bowing, movement and (potentially) resisting death effects.

BERSERKER/DEATHSEEKER

Mechanically, these personalities focus on restoring their status through dying in battle in order to destroy enemies. Their actions should involve sacrifice (self-destruction), effects around their destruction or the restoration of personal and family honour and be focused exclusively on battle.

DUELIST

Mechanically, duelists focus on winning duels. Their actions will focus on creating duels, winning duels and through Focus Effects. They may have actions that work better after they win duels.

KENSAI

Mechanically, Kensai focus on the use of attached weapons in battle. Their actions will use weapons to attack opposing personalities, work better when they have weapons or they may also become more resistant to other players' effects when holding a weapon.

COMMANDER

Mechanically, Commanders are all about buffing their surrounding troops. They inspire others in their army. Their actions will function in a similar way to heroes in some ways, however, they will affect other personalities in their army, perhaps straightening them, preventing movement of others and preventing the destruction of others, they will also interact with Follower cards more heavily than other professions.

TACTICIAN

Mechanically, Tacticians are about knowledge on the battlefield, represented through card draw/search and terrain manipulation. Their actions will focus on getting the right card at the right time they will have the best actions that allow the manipulation of Strategy Cards to win battles.

ARTISAN

Mechanically, Artisans are creative—items, poems, music, paintings. Their actions will focus on creating things. This can be turning one type of thing into another (e.g. focus values into "poems", "speeches" or weapons) and at

times giving those things as "gifts". When combined with the Shugenja trait, Artisans may create one-shot magical items.

TATTOOED

Mechanically, Tattoos are related to "Kung Fu" and the archetypal Martial Artist. Their actions will focus on Kihos used in battle, but not direct kill. Such Kung Fu will be about bowing or incapacitating opposing personalities. NB Shugenja will be less about Kiho than Monks with the readjustment in the Celestial Order.

PARAGONS

Mechanically, Paragons will interact with Bushido cards, they exemplify adherence to the relevant Code of Bushido. Their actions will mainly enhance or better utilize the Bushido actions.

YOJIMBO

Mechanically, the role of Yojimbo is to protect other key personality types—Courtiers, Shugenja or others. Their actions will relate to the targeting of their key personality types in their location

by redirection or the strengthening of their own attributes when in the same location as their key personality type.

NINJA

Mechanically, Ninja actions focus on the concept of prior knowledge of individuals that may (or may not!) make it to the battle. They are like Scouts that target people rather than provinces before battle, reflecting the espionage/assassination function. One of the mechanical ways this will be represented by is Poison Tokens, although the tokens will not be designed to kill in their own right, but rather to weaken opponents.

ALCHEMIST

Mechanically, Alchemist effects will involve combining things from two different elements in order to create something with a one-shot use. That use should reflect the abilities of the two elements in some way. These can be explosive and sometimes even destroy the shugenja using them!

WRAPPING UP

So there you have it. That is our current view of where the themes are going in Celestial.

I hope that this has given you some insight into what we are trying to achieve and how we are trying to do it. I am really looking forward to seeing you all play with the sets we have created. I really hope that you are all going to find Celestial the most stimulating environment yet, and that we will be able to raise the bar that bit further in making this game better than ever before. 🌸



Imperial Gift 2

BY GAËL SCHMIDT-CLÉACH

Last winter, AEG made CCG history by releasing the Imperial Gift, part 1, a 28-card set that had the peculiarity of being absolutely free. The astute reader will have noticed the "part 1," and deduced that it was only the beginning of something bigger. This June, to herald the coming of Celestial Edition, part 2 of the Imperial Gift will be coming to a store near you. And the best thing about it? It is still entirely free.

Now, Imperial Gift 2 is a little different from its predecessor. While part 1 was an independent mini-set, part 2 was designed as a learn-to-play set, and comes in the form of two ready-to-play 81-card decks, including two entirely original Strongholds. All in all, this new installment of the Imperial Gift contains a grand total of 82 new cards, all of them legal for the upcoming Celestial format. Duncan McPhail and I had the honor of heading the design of this project, and it is now my pleasure to present you with the final result.

The two decks that constitute Imperial Gift 2 were designed with the goal of showcasing as many aspects of the game as possible. While learn-to-play sets of the past focused on a few Clans (Storms over Matsu Palace, for instance, had the Lion battling the Unicorn), we wanted IG2 to introduce new players to the richness of Rokugan right away. To that end, two Strongholds were created that allowed us to design this set as a battle between two alliances of Great Clans. Sunrise Keep is the headquarters of a coalition that comprises the Crab, Mantis, Phoenix and Scorpion Clans, while Lost Traveler Castle is used

as a base of operations by the Crane, Dragon, Lion and Unicorn Clans. What about the Spider, you ask? Well, the Spider like hedging their bets, and have therefore sent spies into both camps.

In order to let new players experience the diversity of L5R, the two decks were designed with different goals in mind. One of them is a straight military deck, while

The Design Team wanted IG2 to introduce players to the multifaceted world of L5R without making its complexity too daunting.

the other is more of a switch deck; while its main plan is to turtle up and gain Honor, hoping to cross the 40-Honor mark before losing its last province, it is also able to punish an overconfident opponent by defeating an underprepared army or taking advantage of a hole in the enemy's defense to destroy a province or two. Our

aim was to promote interactions between new players; both decks were therefore designed to encourage the players to face each other on the field of battle.

The Design Team wanted IG2 to introduce players to the multifaceted world of L5R without making its complexity too daunting. Samurai and Shugenja are present in both decks' armies, and both players will have to make intelligent use of their Followers, Items, and even Spells to win the game. While we did not want to dumb the game down too much, some mechanics had to be left out because they did not work with our goals for the set. Dishonor, for instance, is an easy enough concept to grasp, but it requires a certain level of support to be effective, and we did not want to devote that kind of space to any one mechanic. We thought long and hard about adding a duel to the set, but finally decided against it: the inherent randomness of duels when playing with decks not specifically built to use them would have been ultimately frustrating to new players, and stacking one deck with high Focus Value cards did not seem like an acceptable solution to us.

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Of course, compared to your usual tournament-caliber deck, the decks of IG2 may seem like they lack a little focus. After all, experienced players' decks rarely contain seven Followers, seven Items and four Spells, as well as actions that key off both the Samurai and Shugenja keywords. However, these two decks do a good job at presenting L5R in all its variety, both to players completely unfamiliar with Rokugan, and to those who have

experienced the Emerald Empire before. That being said, the Imperial Gift, part 2 was not designed solely with new players in mind. With Celestial Edition right around the corner, we expect many of the set's cards to find their way into competitive decks; the set even comes with eight additional cards that are not part of the two learn-to-play decks, but can be used to customize them, or added directly to your casual or tournament decks. IG2 is intended both as a

way to introduce new players to L5R, and as a thank you from AEG to the players who have supported the game along the years.

For those of you who may not know it, L5R is nearing the fifteen-year mark, which makes it one of the only survivors of the first wave of CCGs that appeared in the mid-1990s. I may be stating the obvious when I say that L5R owes its exceptional longevity to its players, but few are the games lucky enough to have so dedicated and

enthusiastic a player base as L5R. Every year, L5R players prove their love of the game by organizing Kotei and then traveling halfway across continents to sling cards and get a shot at influencing the storyline. A few years ago, when L5R spent eight months in limbo between the release of Spirit Wars and that of Gold Edition, it survived only thanks to the players who kept organizing tournaments and refused to let the game disappear. More recently, the Race for

the Throne became a catalyst for players' enthusiasm, and led to a nail-biting finale.

The Imperial Gift is AEG's way of celebrating both L5R's fifteenth anniversary and the coming of Celestial Edition. Whether you are a new to the world of Rokugan or a grizzled veteran, make sure to grab your own copy of IG2 at your favorite store. Actually, make sure to grab two, and use your extra copy to teach someone else how to play! ❀



The Vacant Throne

IMPERIAL HERALD RPG PREVIEW

BY SHAWN CARMAN

This month will see the release of the latest sourcebook for the Legend of the Five Rings Role-playing Game, *The Vacant Throne*. *The Vacant Throne* (which I hope you will admit is a ridiculously cool title) covers the events that take place in Rokugan from the period of the year 1167 to 1171, the eras generally referred to as the Age of Enlightenment and the Race for the Throne. Like previous era books, *The Vacant Throne* will include all the information you need to set your games during those periods, and will fill in many of the gaps that exist in the story during that time. Every CCG expansion during the Lotus Edition and Samurai Edition periods gets its own chapter, complete with a timeline, mechanics, and major NPCs relevant to that time period.

Perhaps more importantly, however, is the information that is included on how individual characters can be incorporated into the events of these periods. Every chapter includes a section describing how your characters can impact the events being described, or how they can diverge the events from the canon storyline to create their own tales. *The Vacant Throne* is a map, but we left lots of room for you to put your own epic adventures in there as well, and hopefully you and your GM will find it tremendously useful both in revisiting familiar stories and creating your own as well. And now, of course, a little preview!

FROM CHAPTER 4: RISE OF THE SHOGUN

Shiba Danjuro would likely have found his career extraordinary under any circumstances, even if he had not though sheer happenstance become the first to join the Shogun's banner after he swore fealty to the Phoenix Clan. He was always an exceptional student at the dojo, and gained the favor of his sensei at an early age. He was among the youngest samurai ever promoted to an officer's position among the guardians of Shiro Shiba, and it was there that he first met Kaneka when he arrived in the Phoenix lands. Danjuro impressed the despondent former Shogun, and months later when he began gathering new forces, Danjuro was the first name on the list he submitted to the Clan Champion. For years, he worked closely with Kaneka in the Shogun's encampment in Phoenix lands, training a steady stream of bushi from all across the Empire and sending them back once their training was complete, only to make room for a new group. As a result of his work within the Shogunate, Danjuro has become perhaps one of the most honored military officers in the entire Empire, having personally earned the respect of thousands of warriors over the course of almost a decade of work.

During the Rise of the Shogun, Danjuro finds himself in an extremely uncomfortable situation: as the second in command of the Shogunate, and with Kaneka frequently absent or unavailable, Danjuro is the target for many who wish to oust the Shogun from the Imperial City. In addition to his duties maintaining the military readiness and discipline of his forces, Danjuro must constantly fend off angry courtiers and those eager to forge an alliance with what they regard as a major new power in the Empire.

SHIBA DANJURO CHIEF SHIREIKAN OF THE SHOGUN

Air: 3 **Earth:** 3
Fire: 4 **Water:** 3
Void: 4

Stamina: 5 **Perception:** 5
School/Rank: Shiba Bushi 3 / Shiba Elite Guard 1

Honor: 4.1 **Status:** 5.2
Glory: 7.3

Advantages: Balance, Clear Thinker, Social Position (Chief Shireikan of the Shogunate)

Disadvantages: Obligation (Shogun, Elemental Masters)

ALLIES & ENEMIES

Shiba Danjuro is an incredibly powerful ally for any player character to possess, skirting the upper limits of what should be possible to achieve with the Allies Advantage. In terms of his influence, he is easily 5 points given his position, and because of his honorable and virtuous nature, his devotion can range considerably. As a Sworn Enemy, Danjuro is unsuitable largely due to the same personality traits, and because he could easily destroy any player character who drew his attention.

Skills: Battle 6, Defense 7, Horsemanship 3, Iaijutsu 3, Investigation 4, Kenjutsu 4, Kyujutsu 3, Lore: Shugenja 4, Meditation (Void Recovery) 4, Polearms 2, Spears (Naginata) 3, Theology (Shintao) 2

Kata: Eyes of the Phoenix, Striking as Fire, Touching the Infinite

Since the return of Hida Kisada to the mortal realm, there were those among the Crab who did not consider that his mortality had been returned upon his arrival. To them, he was a legend made flesh, a god that walked the earth. They pledged their lives and loyalty to him forever, without question. Among other clans, these claims would have been looked upon with great disdain, for these were men and women already sworn to serve their lord and Champion, Hida Kuon. Kuon understood all too well their feelings, however, and grouped them together into an honor guard to ensure that his grandfather's time in the mortal realm was safe above all else. While this was a largely ceremonial position at first, as Kisada began aging at a preternatural rate, their duties became more legitimate over time.

The death of Kisada shamed the entire group of Guardians. Most of the group was in attendance at Koten during the night of his death, and cannot account for their failure. They committed mass seppuku under the watchful eyes of their Champion. Only a handful, those who were absent from Koten at the time, remain.

FROM CHAPTER 11: DEATH AT KOTEN

NEW PATH GUARDIAN OF THE BEAR

Technique Rank: 4

Path of Entry: Any Crab Bushi School at Rank 3

Requirements: Earth 4, Strength 5, Jiujutsu 5, Heavy Weapons 5

Path of Egress: Re-enter the same School at Rank 4

Technique: **Strength of the Bear**—Those who follow the great Kisada draw their strength from him and live in his honor. You may spend a Void Point to use your Earth Ring in place of any Ring or Trait for a Raw Ring Roll or Raw Trait Roll. Your TN to Be Hit is increased by your Earth Ring, and you gain a number of additional Wounds in your first Wound Rank equal to your Earth Ring. ❀





Duels of Honor

BY TODD C. ROWLAND

Legend of the Five Rings recently became a hit Facebook application game with Duels of Honor. Created by L5R fan, Bong Belardo, the game grew to over 8,000 players in a little over a week. Bong's hard work at making a fun and easy to grasp game was the key to the success.

In Duels of Honor, a player creates a character, who can be either a samurai, shugenja, archer, ninja, monk, or budoka. Unlike other L5R games, you do not choose a Clan. This game is intended to give a large overview of L5R to a massive Facebook audience, so your travels will take you to many various Clan lands without becoming bogged down in the various problems being a Crane in Crab lands would cause.

At the start, you have a certain amount of health, attack power, defense power, and fate. Fate determines how many things you can do at a time. Some actions may take 2 fate, while others take up to 10 fate. If you use up your entire fate, you must wait as it rebuilds over time. Battles, dueling, and various tasks affect all Attack, Defense, and Health. Your health will slowly refill the same as fate. When you level up, you can choose which stats to increase. An early good choice is to increase fate, as you will be able to do more actions and earn more experience. But do not let the other stats lag, as they become vital to the completion of some tasks. For instance, early on in the game goblins raid the village you start in. Should you not have enough

attack and defense, you may not make it past this task.

The completion of tasks and visiting an armory with your koku will allow you to purchase items such as armor and weapons. Items you find will also help to increase your attack and defense. Occasionally you may find a follower who will join you, such as a gruff retired samurai. These followers will join you in your battles.

Of course, no L5R game would be complete without duels. The exciting aspect of Duels of Honor is that your duels are directly against other players. When you choose to duel you will see a list of players you can challenge. Winners will earn experience and a bit of the loser's koku. To avoid grieving, the system will only allow you to challenge players who are about two levels above or below you.

Another aspect that hardcore L5R players have had to become accustomed to is the "buying people" system. Duels of Honor is a Facebook game, and to appeal to the players of social turn-based games like this it includes a system where you can use your koku to "purchase" other player into your Dynasty. Of course, L5R players want to band into their

Clans but then someone with massive koku and no knowledge of L5R can come in and buy up people. It happened quite a bit at first though it has come to settle down as many people put [L5R] in their nicknames and other players have come to respect it. In fact, many non-L5R players have become very interested in our world, which is fantastic!

Of course, the buying of people into Dynasties does have a game-play purpose. As you enter the higher-level tasks, you'll need more strength than a single player can have at that point. When you attack, those in your Dynasty attack with you, even if they are not online. If you lose they don't suffer the consequences, but they will contribute when you are playing your game.

Most exciting of all, due to the success a second L5R Facebook game is in development and will explore more of the Emerald Empire.

If you are not a member of Facebook, sign up today at www.facebook.com and join us in Duels of Honor. There is also a Legend of the Five Rings fan community for our other games that you can plug into and receive information on product news and events. ❀

Winter Court 2009/2010

BY REBECCA HOBART

Every winter, the Fortune of Snow wraps her cold embrace around Rokugan, halting all military movement. But while generals and soldiers huddle around their fires, the courtiers of the Empire sharpen their wits as they prepare to do battle at this most decisive time of year. At every court they gather, to joust for political favors, to maneuver for position and power, and to make and break alliances. Of all of these, the most prominent is the Imperial Winter Court.

To receive an invitation is to earn the jealousy of rivals. To do well there is to gain glory and honor beyond imagining. But words can cut as sharply as any blade, and just as deeply. Death can be just as swift—or as slow and painful—as any battlefield wound. Courtiers have risen to great heights at Winter Court and have fallen just as far. The invitations are being sent out. What will the winter snows hold for you?

The Winter Court play-by-post online event will once again grace the winter of 2009/2010 as part of the lead-in to Legend of the Five Rings' 15th Anniversary. Yours truly will oversee the WC crew this time, after assisting with the last WC in 2006/2007. We hope this court will be bigger and better, thanks to input from both the players and the judges of the previous WC (Kyuden Otomo). Changes are being made that will improve the overall flow of the game, ranging from an improved application process to better effects on the storyline.

We received a lot of feedback regarding the application process for WC:KO, and we've taken it all to heart. This year's application will be easier to understand and will help us make decisions more easily. For example, rather than a generic "qualifications" box that left appli-

cants to ponder what they should write, we will be asking specific questions. Some will be as simple as a drop-down menu, while others will request a 250-word answer—but none of them should make you wonder what we mean.

We've shortened the playing time of this Winter Court by about a month. Three months was just too long of a run, too hard on both the players and the judges. We also are working on making this WC feel more "alive," with people and places for the characters to interact with, instead of a blank-slate forum that the players had to populate on their own. Because of all this, we will have a larger and more specialized team of GMs and Mods, with clearly defined responsibilities and powers. In some ways this WC will be stricter than the first one, but this should create a more stable structure for play.

And play there will be. The players' actions and choices WILL have an impact on the L5R story, and we are going to pack this winter full of events and goals for everyone. No character should end up with nothing to do. And the effects on the story and the Mega Game will be immense.

Join us this winter and see what you can do for your Clan and the Empire! ❀



To Go Far is to Return (and Go Again)

BY JUSTIN WALSH

Things have certainly changed a lot since I picked up Legend of the Five Rings and started playing. I would be lying if I said that every one of the choices made for L5R had worked out over that time; but a great many of them have done just that. For every Rolling Thunder, there has been something just as significant, often subtle and quietly determined, that has put L5R on a better path. Even if we acknowledge nothing else, L5R is still here after almost 15 years, and that says something unarguable in its own right.

One of the things that L5R has had to live with for its entire existence is the phenomenal success of the Clan War. The themes that ran through that arc have defined the understandings of each Clan from that day to this, and it is a terrible burden for any story to carry. In many ways, the core characters from that epoch stood in stark contrast to the Clan archetypes they were supposed to embody. This is a powerful device, but the legacy of intra-Clan divisions that it left behind, and the absent expectation of, and desire for a unified Clan identity have made meaningful developments in the game much more difficult to undertake.

For me, one of the great legacies of Todd's time as Brand Manager has been the unification of Clan identity. Instead of that identity taking back seat to the contrarian quirks of individual characters, each Clan is now an identifiable whole, possessed of direction and clarity. There are no more Shadowed Towers. The Harriers are gone. The Phoenix are not going to implode in haze of blood-fueled madness. There is a loss here, unquestionably, of a certain kind of comfort, of definition through self-reference. But such a circular process shuts out external influence, and ultimately gives rise to stagnation.

Where the Clans are focused only on internal discourse, progressing the greater story becomes that much more difficult.

And that brings us to now. While claiming some sort of master plan through all of it is tempting, it simply wouldn't be true. But each decision on L5R's direction, good or bad, has opened new avenues up, and closed others behind. L5R has stretched itself in many ways over its history, testing its boundaries, and there is now a sense and confidence among Design, Story, and Brand that an essential understanding of L5R has been reached (and, in which, it must be noted, the mistakes have counted for far more than the successes). There are more unknown horizons ahead of course, but the shadows of history are receding, slipping behind us little by little. The weight of antiquity is lifting. L5R is preparing to define itself anew on terms that allow it to move forward, having mastered its past.

Celestial Edition, coming this June, represents in many ways the culmination of a journey. As with Samurai Edition, there is a sense of return. But with Celestial, that sense is more profound again: It will conclude the inward-looking process undertaken with Samurai

and once more turn L5R's gaze outward. Perhaps in another 15 years we will look back and see Celestial Edition as another logical step in L5R's progression. I certainly hope we do. But for now, it represents the distillation of a collective understanding about the world of Rokugan, to which we all have contributed something essential.

The culmination of one journey is the start of another.

Those who are familiar with my posts on the forums will by now know that I'm a big fan of transparency, and that I don't like sugar-coating things. So when I say this job scares the crap out of me, you'll know I mean it. It involves a simply insane amount of work across so many disciplines that it is, without doubt, the most intimidating thing I have ever undertaken. And I've undertaken some doozies. Simultaneously, my respect for anyone who has done this before me has increased to epic proportions. After three months, I still feel like I'm scratching the surface of what the job entails, and that is not usual in my experience. But it's probably because of that challenge that I'm really enjoying it (in between the



panic attacks). Thankfully, AEG is replete with great people who have made, and continue to make the learning process an enjoyable

one. My greatest hope is to repay the faith that has been shown in me, and to leave L5R if only a little better for my efforts. ❀



First Among the Guard

BY FRED WAN EDITED BY JUSTIN WALSH

A NAMELESS MOUNTAIN RANGE, 3 YEARS AGO

Lady Moon was not being cooperative. Little of her light seeped past the clouds, barely enough to safely traverse the various paths Shiba Erena's troops were taking through the mountains in pursuit of their foes. Fortunately, the chase had ended, and her quarry was now contained in a small clearing. Inquisitor Mitsuko had uncovered the small cult, dedicated to the Dark God, while she was a guest at one of the Great Clan's courts. Now, at the request of the host clan, Shiba Erena's unit was about to descend upon the cult and destroy it. After several days of pursuit, the battle would finally be joined. The conclusion would be bloody, and both sides knew it.

Off to her side, discipline and excitement warring on his face, stood a shugenja, the latest to be assigned to her unit. The last few days had been trying ones, but Erena had never found his resolve or his skills to be lacking. Over the last several months, he had grown from an untested novice, fresh from gempukku, to a reliable, if still somewhat green, battlefield shugenja. He was typical of the various adjuncts that she had been assigned: young, eager, and determined to serve Clan and Empire, even at the cost of his life. As the commander of a small detachment of Phoenix bushi, Erena knew this quality to be an invaluable asset in combat. As a Shiba, she made it a point not to allow situations to develop where such a sacrifice would be needed.

Battlefields, however, made it difficult to keep people alive. Most likely, she would soon be requesting a new shugenja for her unit. If he survived the coming battle, he would be promoted, and she would need a new aide. If he did not...

She pushed the idea away with distaste and peered down at the clearing, confirming her earlier assessment of the situation. The battle would be difficult. Although her forces had the higher ground, there were several rocky outcroppings in the clearing for cover. Her troops had bows, as did the cultists, but in the poor light, archery would be of little assistance. She could order her forces to unshutter their lanterns, but illuminating her own forces would likely prove less helpful than fatal. She needed light, but she needed it to originate in the clearing.

Erena looked back at the Isawa in her unit.

"Can you request the kami to provide light?" she whispered.

He nodded enthusiastically, then frowned, and gestured at the lan-

terns, which had been shuttered at her command. A questioning look crossed his face.

Erena merely pointed down at the clearing.

Slowly, a soft glow began to illuminate the air around the cultists. A few heartbeats later, it was joined by the whistle of arrows and the cries of the wounded. Erena smiled grimly. The battle was going well, and she expected to prevail with few problems. Her aide had indeed proven himself seasoned enough for a new assignment, and she would need to request a new one.

Erena frowned. She hated paperwork.

WINTER COURT, THE FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF EMPRESS IWEKO

Shiba Erena reflected as she traveled down the hallways of the Scorpion castle. The last few years had been kind: her successes for the Phoenix had brought her further opportunities, culminating in a chance to represent her clan at Winter Court. Things had been going smoothly so far, although she had no idea what could have prompted the meeting that was about to occur. She was also disconcerted that she could not bring her current aide to the meeting; he had a comfort with, even an affection for, bureaucracy and the courts that she completely lacked.

Erena arrived at the appointed chamber, and was ushered in by one of the servants. Bayushi Hisoka, the Imperial Chancellor, knelt in front of a small desk, writing swiftly. He looked up, set his brush down, and gestured to the floor in front of him. Erena knelt before the Chancellor and bowed low. Behind her, the servant slid the paper wall back into place, leaving the two to their conversation.

Hisoka looked at her for a moment, but said nothing. Erena thought the Chancellor, like all Scorpions, was searching for a flaw or weakness of character to exploit. She fought down the impulse to respond in some way—surely, as the Chancellor, Hisoka had put aside the petty games and manipulations of his clan. Surely.

After the span of several heartbeats, Hisoka finally spoke. His voice was warm, comforting, even somewhat friendly. That made his question all the more strange.

"Tell me of failure, Shiba Erena."

"Failure, my lord?"

"Failure," he repeated. "We Scorpion find that how a samurai de-

fines failure can be... a useful insight into her nature."

"I do not understand, Chancellor."

Hisoka leaned forward. "Speak to me of failure—your own, or your family's." He paused, and looked down at his robes, tugging mo-

"Tell me of failure, Shiba Erena."

"Failure, my lord?"

"Failure," he repeated.

mentarily at his sleeves, which were dyed a vivid, crimson red. He looked up again. "I am not seeking to shame you, nor am I seeking some secret advantage. However," and his smile widened, even as his tone became ominous, "I am testing you, and we Scorpion do enjoy making others feel ill at ease. Now, tell me a tale of failure, Shiba-san."

"The Clan War."

Hisoka said nothing, and waited for her to continue.

"When the Empire was young, Shiba dedicated his life, and the lives of his descendants, to the protection of the line of Isawa, in gratitude for Isawa's willingness to do what a Kami could not. During the Clan War, the Isawa suffered. Terribly. Their studies of the Black Scrolls cost them dear."

Hisoka leaned forward. "Your clan brought word of the Prophecy of Thunder to an Empire that had lost its way. The Isawa bore a terrible price, but they succeeded, and the Empire remembers their sacrifice. How then, did the Shiba fail the Isawa?"

"Because we did not find a way to suffer in their stead."

Hisoka picked up his brush again, and wrote a few more characters. His lips quirked into another smile.

"Congratulations. You, Shiba-san, shall be the first."

"The first of what, Chancellor?"

"Although the notion that someone would strike at the Divine One is foolish, you must agree that Her loyal subjects should take steps to prevent any such ac-

tion by the misguided or deluded. I have taken upon myself the duty of assembling Her Guard, and you have just been given the honor of being the first among them." With his free hand, Hisoka reached below the desk and produced a small scroll case. "I believe you will find all the necessary papers within. You will immediately wish to begin making arrangements."

"Thank you, Chancellor, I..."

Hisoka raised his hand, signaling her silence. "Among those papers, you will also find orders transferring your current aide to serve amongst the Empress' retinue. His work on your behalf has been most impressive."

Erena bowed low, and left the room. Hisoka smiled. The Empress' Guard would be called upon to serve in many capacities in the days to come, and for some, their duties would include no small amount of sacrifice. He hoped that the other people he selected for the role would share Erena's appreciation for true scope of a guard's duty.

Erena, for her part, simply frowned. She would need another aide, and she hated paperwork.

From Then Till Now

THOUGHTS LEADING TO MEGA GAME 2

BY JUSTIN WALSH

It's an exciting time for Legend of the Five Rings. The first Mega Game—The Race for the Throne—is over, and a new Empress resides over Rokugan directly as a result of the tireless efforts of thousands of players. Next year is the 15th anniversary of the L5R CCG, an incredible milestone for any game, let alone one that operates in such a difficult and unforgiving market. With a range of new products upcoming, and sets selling out, it would seem that this is a time to look forward.

And it certainly is.

But to ensure we make the best of it, we need first to look back. At how things have changed, and at what we at AEG can and now must do better.

From its inception, the feature that set L5R apart, and one of the most important things about it, was the idea of an interactive storyline. (Some would say it is the most important thing, but that's simply not true: the players are.) The idea of offering customers a stake in the development of an entire fantasy world is a great one, as evidenced by the passion people show for the product, and the investments they make, financially and personally, in furthering their own visions of that universe. At its zenith, L5R offers what so many gaming prod-

ucts, whether pen and paper or electronic, strive for: a persistent world, influenced by the players, immersing them and eliciting deep passion and identification. It is this last quality that has given L5R its longevity and the strength to survive, even when faced with disasters that would have buried almost any other game.

Identification, or identity, is not something that can be easily created or marketed. If it is genuine, it is an outcome of other things that work together to transcend the notion of 'product' and exceed the sum of their parts. At its root, L5R delivers two types of product: the games (CCG, RPG, etc.), and a story that is both influenced by, and influences, those games. It is probably here, in the give-and-

take of that influence, that a player's individual investment mingles with the shared hopes of those with a similar outlook to produce the intense feelings of community and attachment that go beyond what a game traditionally means. The story is both the source and the outcome of all those ingredients.

This is not to belittle the role of the game, upon which the entire enterprise ultimately rides in a variety of ways. The games shoulder an immense burden. Without those games providing very real income, the ephemeral story could never be written. Even divorced momentarily from their own considerable merits and those of their designers, regulators, and testers,

-continued on next page



-From *Then Till Now*, from previous page

they are the gateways to a new world, and the foundations upon which all else rests. Again, it is the intimate co-mingling of game and story that gives rise to the unique vision of L5R: This is a world. You help shape it. The game is the means.

The idea remains great. But—and this is where the path to the new Mega Game really begins—the avenues by which it is explored have, over the years, become predictable.

The heady feelings of pioneering a new style of gaming, of exploring virgin territory, of blazing a trail, have given way to the demands and strictures of a production cycle, staid and safe. Because of this process, player input into story has had to be constrained, and so the storyline prizes that players compete for are already factored into an overall story arc: 'The Clan that wins this storyline tournament will defeat the dark god, Fu Leng at the Day of Thunder.' The prize itself is exciting, but we lose something ineffable through the knowledge

of the outcome. We know that, in the end, Fu Leng will be defeated. The result is never truly in question. The 'how' is already largely decided, only the 'who' remains to be seen.

We want to change that.

The Race for the Throne was a huge step forward, and represents possibly the single greatest watershed in L5R's history. There were things about The Race that could have been better, unquestionably. But the idea at the heart of it, the kernel of vision, expanded the

limits of L5R's horizons further than anything that came before it, and it is up to AEG to continue pushing those boundaries.

But what about 'staid' and 'safe,' 'constrained' and 'decided?' These aren't words that fire the imagination, or pretty words, or even desirable words, but they accurately describe a reality. They're also words that we at AEG hate. We rail against them. We try to find new ways to break them.

We are not in the business of reality.

But nothing structured will ever escape constraints and forward-thinking decisions. Nobody can work with complete chaos.

But we can make things less safe, less certain. If anything, we must take this approach. And not just when it comes to the inhabitants of a mythical, mystical land; not, by extension, for those people who follow and cheer and fervently hope for those inhabitants. If nothing else, AEG has to make things less safe for itself.

We need to be challenged. Without that, patterns form in both behavior and product, things become predictable all over again, and, without even realizing it, we're back at much the same place we started from: maybe a little better, but treading water all the same. This doesn't speak to the natural processes of improvement that motivated people undertake regardless of other concerns, but it is also true that we learn and improve most when forced to address a new context, or reconsider our ideas on unfamiliar terms. In short, in order to best develop, we cannot have complete control. We

have to put ourselves on the line in some meaningful way. We have to allow the game to slip ever so slightly from our grasp. We have to take the risk that we might fail.

The Celestial Edition Mega Game represents such a risk.

So why even take the chance? Because if it works... It will be amazing. It will bring players into the world like never before. It will change the way Rokugan is. Forever. You, the players, will have taken incredible responsibility for something that we've been afraid to give up, something we thought was vital, untouchable. If it works, we will have realized

an arc in which we knew where everything was at the start, but genuinely couldn't be sure where things would be at the end. That is what you, the players will have helped us determine, and in a way that we have never before allowed. The ongoing Kotei season offers the tiniest glimpse of where we are going—certainly in theme and consequence—but, if you read between some very fine lines, you may perceive the scope of what we are aiming for, and why we cannot say how it will end.

Ultimately, we are doing it because, if it works, we believe that we will have achieved something remarkable: We will have breathed life into the clay. A potential that we have so carefully, even fearfully guarded will finally be set free.

Rokugan, so long an idea, will finally be a place.

More on the Mega Game will feature in the next issue of the Imperial Herald. ❀

Rokugan, so long an idea, will finally be a place.

Death at Koten: A True Hollywood Story

BY TODD ROWLAND

So hopefully by now you have your copy of *Death at Koten* in your hands, be it from the kit sold at Alderac.com or your local comic shop. The development of this product was a unique experience for Alderac Entertainment Group. It is the first time we ever crafted a Graphic Novel for any of our game-lines. There was a short-run 7th Sea comic series many years ago, but it was produced by a licensor, so this was really our first attempt at comics. Wow, if we knew what we were getting into...

It all began with a meeting. We were discussing the concept of the next direct-to-player set. I don't recall who suggested a graphic novel, I like to think it was me but I don't honestly recall, and Shawn lit up. He'd always wanted to work on a comic and his enthusiasm pushed the idea through. After that we were off to the races.

As Shawn worked feverishly on the script, I went to work on... reading graphic novels (yeah, tough work, right?). Everything from the new Transformers series by IDW to *The Walking Dead* by Image, I was plowing through them, trying to learn how they set up things in the stories, how they did credits and legal text, etc. Also did a lot of research on how the big dogs market their books, and on the production side such as what types of paper stock and inks are used. After a massive crash course on creating comics, we contacted our friends at Imaginary Friends Studios about doing the artwork.

IFS has been doing art for the L5R card game for a few years now. Many of the artists in their stable are big fans of the setting, and one in particular who goes by the name YJL had already done L5R fan art and was a natural choice. Shawn provided a Dramatis Personae document and YJL went to work sketching the characters. You can see some of those original sketches in the back of the *Death at Koten* book. As we were finalizing the look of all the major characters, Shawn provided the entire script. And he wasn't playing around, it was a script of every frame in the book! Here's an excerpt:

PAGE 3

Panel 1 Side-shot of the Sensei, wind rustling his robes and his hair, which should be shaved on top in the traditional samurai manner, black shot through with streaks of white.

Sensei: The future, my child. When I look upon the dojo, I see the future.

Panel 2 The student, head bowed.

Student: You have told me not to be so literal many times, sensei. Forgive me.

Panel 3 The Sensei walks to the altar.

Sensei: No recriminations today, little one. Tell me, do you know what this shrine is?

Panel 4 The Student joins the Sensei, and gestures to a kanji upon the shrine

Student: This is a shrine to the tenet of Chugo, sensei. Duty. The greatest of bushido's teachings.

Panel 5 A close-up of the shrine. Use historical photographs to get a real sense of authenticity here.

Sensei (off-panel): The Scorpion revere duty above all else. It is our unwavering loyalty to our duty that sets us apart, that ensures our path is true.

After a few weeks the first penciled pages began to appear in our email inboxes, and shortly after the first colored pages. However, about this time our then contact at IFS departed the company. A new rep named Ling Yan Tay quickly contacted me. Ling Yan was a blessing! She was incredibly professional and a delight to work with. Unfortunately due to the transition we were somewhat behind schedule. We looked at our options and decided the best course of action was to trim out a few scenes. There had been an additional library scene, which was removed but still referenced in Tashime's statement about tiring of libraries. The only shot of an Utaku battle maiden disappeared, and one of the Unicorn characters in the card set magically became Shinjo. A few other minor shots were removed, though I doubt we'll ever go back and do the Director's Cut!

Near the end of the process Ling Yan sent in the lettered pages and the entire AEG staff when to work proofreading. At this same time our old friend Mark Jelfo started working on laying out the book, including the cover text, credits, etc. and preparing the book for print.

Finally in early March all was approved at the book went to press. I had a big drink after that.

I realized I haven't talked much about Mark and Bryan and the card set, but those guys are pros, and their side was well in hand the entire time. The design guys put together a great set and Brent Keith jumped in to help ensure the sheets were checked and ready to go. Smooth sailing on the cards.

So now we're done. You've read it and we hope you liked it! Needless to say discussion has already started on where we go from here. Just watch L5R.com in the future and you may see updates about more L5R on the printed page. ❀



THE FUTURE, MY CHILD.

WHEN I LOOK UPON THE DOJO, I SEE THE FUTURE.

YOU HAVE TOLD ME NOT TO BE SO LITERAL MANY TIMES, SENSEI.

FORGIVE ME.

NO RECRIMINATIONS TODAY, LITTLE ONE.

TELL ME, DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS SHRINE IS?

THIS IS A SHRINE TO THE TENET OF CHUGO.

DUTY.

THE GREATEST OF BUSHIDO'S TEACHINGS.

THE SCORPION REVERES DUTY ABOVE ALL ELSE.

IT IS OUR UNWAVERING LOYALTY TO OUR DUTY THAT SETS US APART.

THAT ENSURES OUR PATH IS TRUE.



Bricks and Mortar

BY JOHN ZINSER

There is a reason we call the stores that promote *Legend of the Five Rings* "Stronghold Stores." Your local Bricks and Mortar retail store is part of the front line, the Great Kaiu Wall that guards our gaming traditions.

Gaming retailers take a huge risk bringing in a product line like *Legend of the Five Rings*. They put money, time, their very livelihoods on the line so we gamers can have a place to meet new people, play, and discover new things. We created the Stronghold Store program to help keep retailers strong, not only for AEG products, but for all others as well. Because we care about games, probably as much as the owners of your local game store.

As much as they do? Oh yeah, you bet.

The only reason you open a game store is because you love games. Gamers with this kind of commitment, who make the sacrifices and take the necessary risks deserve to be treated with respect and honor. AEG will be leading the push this year with other manufacturers to make life better for current retailers, and to give gamers with the dream of doing it themselves the chance to do so. There is little so wonderful as walking into your first truly great game store. It was 25 years ago for me, but I remember it like it was a field trip to Disneyland. Magical.

Harking back to the Great Wall analogy, the life of a retailer is often like the life of a Crab Samurai; and everyone knows that, while the Crab are ever vigilant, they protect the Empire so much better with help from the other Clans. AEG places a lot of focus on retailer support and we feel that you as a player should do the same.

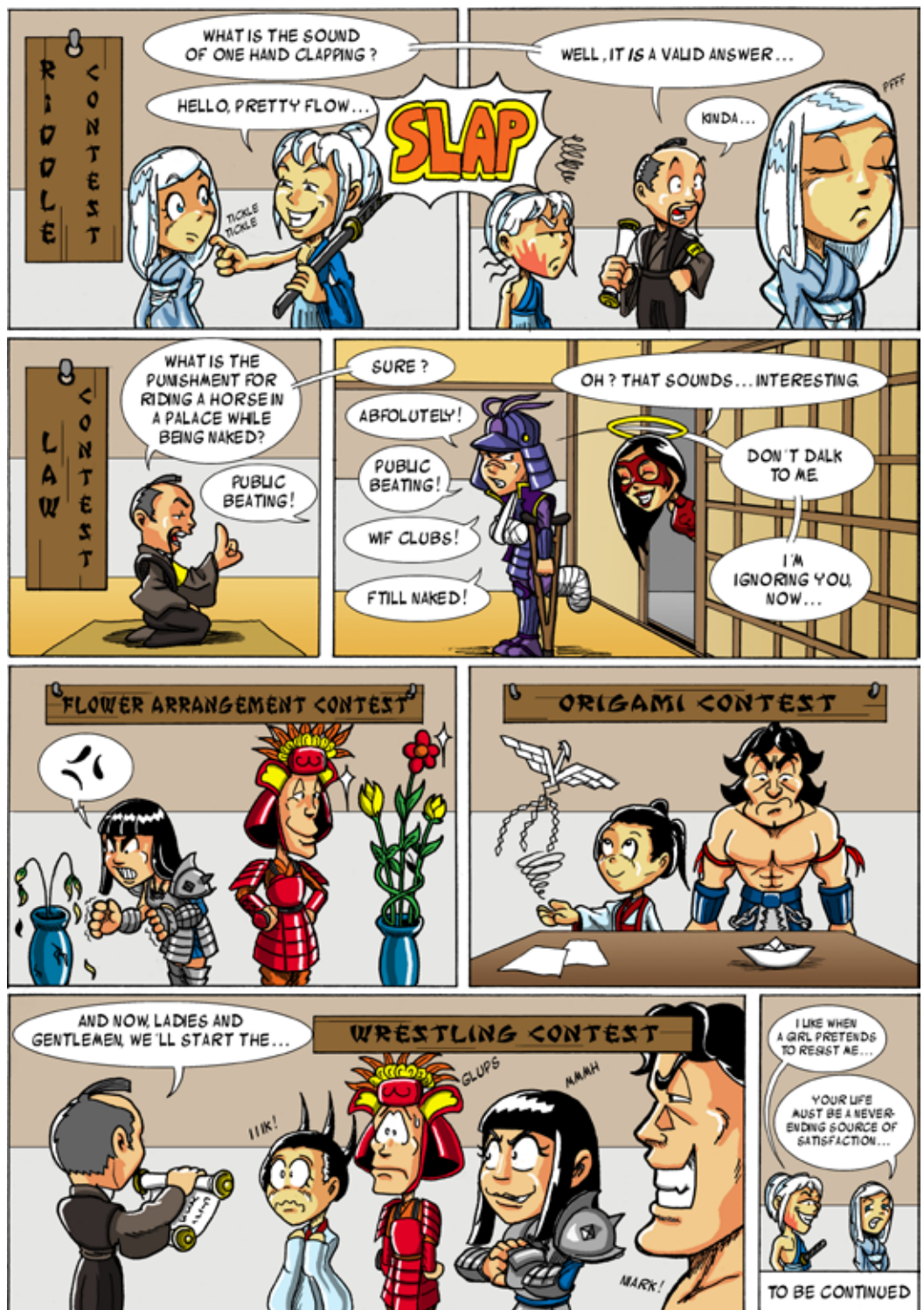
So how can you help your local retailer? Well, you can start by buying cards from them. Even if you have other sources, make sure you pay respect to the person who is paying for the space in which you play. You can help them organize events, and, if you are really feeling it, recruit new players to raise their Stronghold Store level so you can all reap the rewards of our upgraded program for retailers.

THINGS TO COME

Here are just a few of the special things we have in store for you at your Friendly Local Game Store:

- **Imperial Gift 2:** Coming with Celestial Edition
- **Box of Greed:** An oldie but a goodie. You never know when the box of Greed is coming
- **Free Booster Pack Day:** Scheduled for later this year, a chance to play Blitz L5R for free
- **Events:** Tons of events.
- **Mega Game Leagues:** The New Mega Game starts in October, and Bricks and Mortar stores will be the only place to play in monthly leagues. You stand to win some great prizes just for being there.

If you are looking for a great game store in your area, go to our website to find a store near you. <http://www.l5r.com/dojodays/search-Stores.php>



L5R Main site	www.l5r.com	Phoenix	www.thephoenixclan.com www.asako.de (German)
L5R Ning	l5rnetwork.ning.com	Scorpion	www.kuroiban.net
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The death of Kisada is only the beginning...

Death at Koten

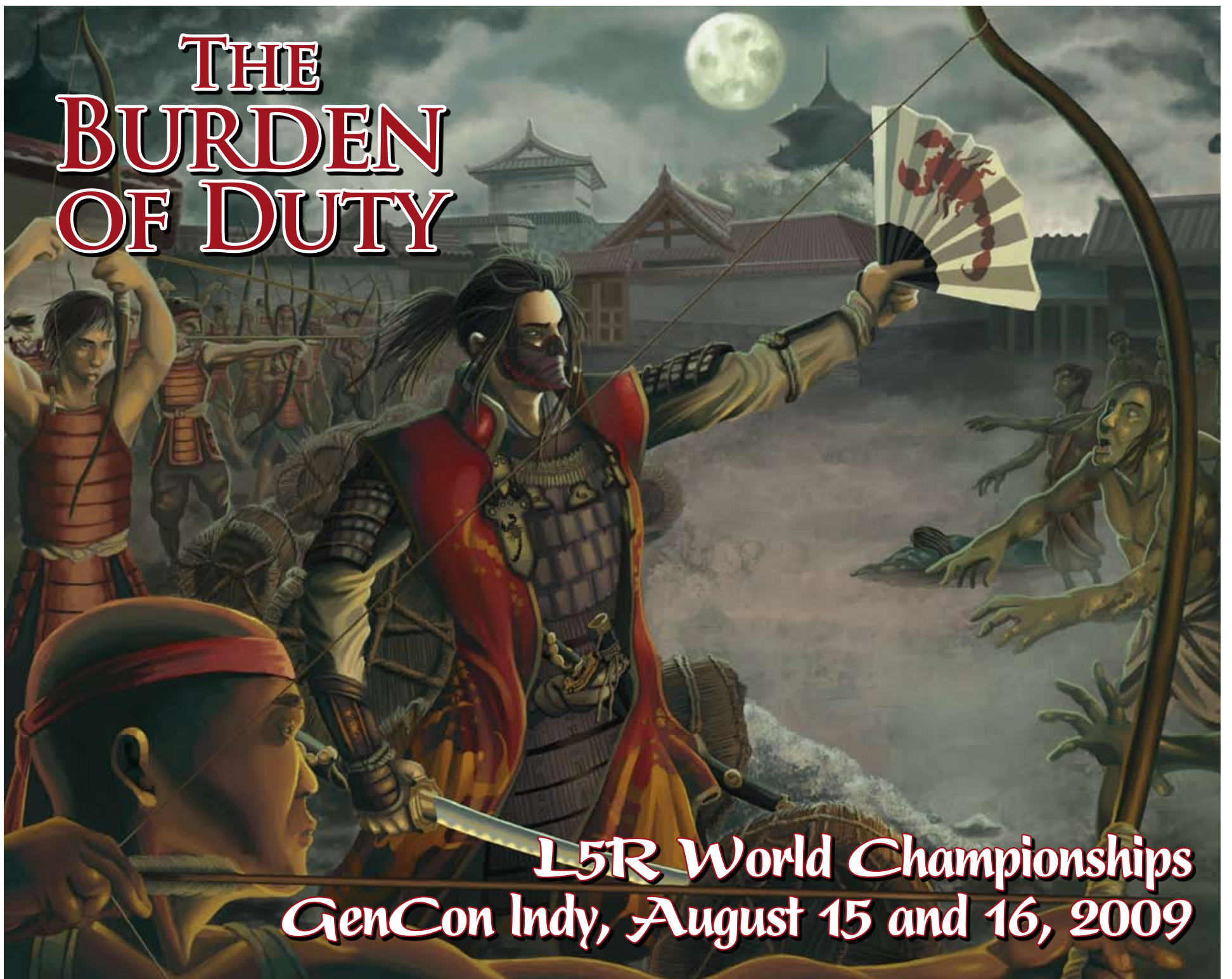
The Graphic Novel

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