

Challenge, Focus, Strike!

Adventure Hooks for Legend of the Five Rings

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

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

For the sake of further organizing these, I have attempted to give each hook a title (also taking inspiration from suggestions on the forum). The hooks themselves are presented in the order that they were originally posted, edited for brevity and typography. In addition, you will find several headings denoting a category of scenarios, grouped by theme. Some entries may include a section entitled "Shout." These are simply extensions of the CFS presented to add more complications or hooks.

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

– Sean C. Riley (a.k.a. Pirate Spice)

Bandits

27. Silk & Skulduggery

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

It looks like a perfect day for hunting bandits!

CHALLENGE

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

FOCUS

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

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

STRIKE

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

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

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

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

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

28. Twenty Koku

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

CHALLENGE

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

FOCUS

The message could be any of the following:

FROM THE BLACKMAILER

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

FROM THE KIDNAPPER

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

FROM THE EXPLORER

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

FROM THE YOJIMBO

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

FROM THE INNKEEPER

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

STRIKE

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

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

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

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

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

29. Smoke & Mirrors

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

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

CHALLENGE

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

FOCUS

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

A few minutes later, shapes can be seen moving through the trees on the opposite side of the camp. Shouts are heard in the distance. More shapes are seen, and one of the travelers shouts that a man is going after the horses. More voices cry out, and the sound of battle is heard. The fire suddenly disappears. Chaos breaks loose.

STRIKE

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

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

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

30. Death & Taxes

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

CHALLENGE

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

FOCUS

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

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

STRIKE

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

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

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

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

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

31. Crime & Punishment

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

CHALLENGE

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

FOCUS

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

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

STRIKE

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

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

and leave his family to die in the cold, will they truly be able to live with their decision?

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

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

Zombies

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

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

32. The Bloodscrolls: A Familiar Face

It all starts with a personal problem....

CHALLENGE

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

He does not stop fighting until he is killed.

FOCUS

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

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

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

And each day thereafter.

STRIKE

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

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

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

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

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

SHOUT

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

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

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

33. The Bloodscrolls: The Zombie Plague

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

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

CHALLENGE

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

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

FOCUS

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

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

STRIKE

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

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

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

SHOUT

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

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

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

It is said to be cursed.

The plot thickens! What evil could possibly await our heroes?

More zombies, of course!

34. The Bloodscrolls: The Dead Shall Rise

This week's scenario builds on the events described in last week's adventure. If the player characters are not aware of the problems that are coming from Mt. Kougen, you can always have their superior order them

to travel there to investigate strange signs, or simply have them wander upon the place by chance. Any reason for them to be in the area should suffice to get them involved.

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

CHALLENGE

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

FOCUS

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

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

STRIKE

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

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

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

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

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

EXTENSION:

A note is next to the bloodscroll.

~~Asako Hiromi~~
~~Foritaka Ziji~~
~~Matsu Takemitsu~~
~~Kuni Hirokazu~~
~~Kuni Toshi~~

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

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

Unless someone else finds him first.

35. The Bloodscrolls: Army of Darkness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHALLENGE

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

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

FOCUS

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

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

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

STRIKE

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

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

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

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